RIDER OF THE MIDNIGHT RANGE

WILL ERMINE

a ...ite Circle ...ern



PUBLISHED by COLLINS

Adventure in the West

HUNTING wild horses in the Snake River country seemed a good money-making idea to Jim Carver and his friends, but nobody could foresee the perils that went with it! Wild horses certainly crossed his path, but other things too—things that spelt danger: there was a man, and a buried treasure; there was a missing man—the dogging footsteps of death, and murder. And to come out of a tough situation with a whole skin Jim had to turn detective. Will Ermine's fast-moving story simply bristles with exciting situations.



RIDER OF THE MIDNIGHT RANGE

WILL ERMINE



WILD WEST CLUB
WILLIAM COLLINS, SONS AND CO., LTD.
LONDON 48 PALL MALL · S·W·1

PRINTED BY K. MITTRA, AT THE INDIAN PRESS, LTD., ALLAHABAD AND PUBLISHED AT THE SAME ADDRESS BY WM. A. COLLINS FOR WM. COLLINS SONS & CO., LTD. GLASGOW & LONDON.

CHAPTER I

DRAWING rein on a high sage crest, Jim Carver had his quick look at the open country spread out below. The three men with him—by their looks, hard-bitten, devil-may-care punchers, like Carver himself—did the same. After long hours under the hot blaze of the sun, they would have welcomed the sight of willows and cottonwood bordering Crazy Creek and the tumble-down peeled-log store that marked Bridger's Ford, had there not been other things on their minds.

"There she is," Hunch Wheeler grunted. He was lean and hard, with a reddish stubble of beard against which his keen blue eyes contrasted startlingly. An almost fantastic intuition accounted for his nickname.

"Yuh reckon he's at the store?" queried Skip Lang, the kid of the outfit, slim and alert.

Gnarled Tex Johnson growled: "He's there, all right!" and Carver nodded. Straightening in the saddle, sinewy and young, with a lean, cheerful face, he was plainly the dominant one of the four. His gaze returned to the store at the ford.

There was no one in sight. Forty miles from the little cow-town of Medicine Dance, the store appeared silent and deserted to-day. But Carver did not relax his vigilance. "Stick behind me," he murmured. Cutting around through the brush, he approached the store from the side, the others with him. All slipped noiselessly from the saddle.

No sound betrayed their presence as they moved to the door and peered in. The proprietor, long and lanky, homely of visage, and with a tawny lock of straw-coloured hair hanging between his eyes, stood behind the counter adding a column of figures on a piece of butcher paper. He was alone.

Silently warning the others, Carver stepped in and slid close along the counter without being detected. Half a dozen feet from the other man he halted. Suddenly he spoke.

"I want a pound of cheese—and I want it delivered!"

The lanky one jerked erect with a start of amazement. Anger flickered across his lean-jawed face, and his gun came out in a twinkling. He stared.

After a tense moment, a change came in those pale, blazing eyes, and his jaw dropped. A grin of sheepish incredulity followed, and he let out a whoop.

"Doggone if it ain't Jim Carver!" he ejaculated. "Wal, fer Gawd sakes!" There was quick delight and welcome in his tone. Getting around the counter as fast as he could, he wrung Carver's hand hard, pounded him on the back. "Shore is great to see yuh again, yuh old hoss thief! Three years is a long time in this country. How yuh been keepin' yoreself?"

"Fit as a fiddle," Carver laughed. He glanced about the store. The stock on the shelves was so thin and stretched-out that it amounted to little more than an excuse for a store. Taking it all in, Carver turned back to his friend, his gaze measuring. "How come you're runnin' a store, Candy? I heard you were here, but the last time I saw you, you were talkin' about a little spread of your own. I didn't know you meant butter——"

Candy Sims, or Oscar Sims, and he was better known by his nickname than by his real one, grinned ruefully.

"Reckon it *is* a come-down fer a man with ambitions," he confessed. "But things have been mighty slack on the Medicine Dance range, Jim. And they're gittin' worse——"

Carver said: "You wrote me you had a good job ridin' for the Cross 8. Why didn't you stick to that?"

Candy's homely visage grew longer. "Because there jest ain't no job no more—nor no Cross 8 neither! Old Hep Martin died durin' the winter. His wife went to live with her married sister in Wind River Basin, after sellin' the spread. It was throwed into the big Gunsight range." He made an attempt to brighten. "What about Tex and Hunch and Skip?" he queried. "Drifted apart by this time, I expect?"

The trio remaining outside had only waited for this moment to come dashing in to overwhelm the lanky one. "Who's talkin' about us?" Hunch sang out. "Give him the cart-wheel, boys!" Grabbing Candy, he whirled him to Tex, who sent him spinning in Skip Lang's direction. It was a moment before Sims got away from them and mastered his surprise. He stared from face to face suspiciously, turning back to Carver.

"Somethin' goin' on here," he declared. "What are yuh up to, anyway——?"

"Listen to him," Hunch jeered satirically. "Try to do the man a favour, an' he shies away! . . . Why, we come fer you, Candy, if that's too hard for yuh to guess."

Candy sniffed. "Where yuh goin'?" he demanded.

"We're foggin' the wild ones—an' you're helpin' us," Skip said, and grinned. Candy's eyes only got more suspicious.

"Is that right, Jim?" he queried of Carver. "Are yuh goin' wild horse huntin'?"

Carver nodded. "Things are not much better with us than they are with you, Candy. We're going up into the Tetons, around the headwaters of the Snake, and we want you to go with us."

Candy was dubious. "No money in broom-tails," he grunted. "Whyn't yuh think of a harder way to make money?"

Carver smilingly diagreed. "That's where you're wrong, Candy," he said. "You think if the ranchers aren't doing anything, it's a poor time to try and sell 'em wild stock; and that's how a lot of others will figure. But there's a war starting over in Europe—and that means horses for the army. Plenty of 'em!"

But Candy remained unconvinced. "Grantin' there's somethin' in what yuh say, why hit up into the west slope of the Tetons? That's wild busted country, fit fer nothin' but mountain sheep. It's owlhoot country, too——"

Hunch waved his objections aside. "We'll be huntin' for hossflesh, Candy—not owlhoots," he scoffed. "Once they savvy that, we won't even ketch sight of 'em! Fer another reason, Jim's still got that cabin an' collection of corrals he calls a hoss ranch, over there on the Steppin' Stone. It'll be headquarters fer us."

Candy scratched his long jaw as he thought it over. He shot them an inclusive look. "What's the idee of comin' to me?" he barked. "Expectin' me to outfit the expedition, huh?"

The words elicited a shout of mirth from the others. "I'd shore hate to be along on the trip yuh outfitted from what yuh got here, Candy!" Hunch laughed. "No, I reckon we kin scrape up enough fer our outfit, if you'll do the same. We jest figgered we could use an extra man." He paused. "Don't tell use you'd rather stick with the business you've built up here," he grinned.

Candy shook his head. "No, 'tain't that," he admitted ruefully. "Reckon I could be gone a week before anybody knowed it. But how do we know we'll be any better off with a big bunch of scrub stuff in the corrals than we are right now?"

They talked it over at length. It was an hour before Carver succeeded in persuading the homely one that their plan had definite merits.

"If we have any luck, we'll gather in some fair stallions up there in the hills," he pointed out. "They've been left alone a long time now. We're certain to pick up a sizable bunch. After we've cleaned out the runts and splay-feet and alkalied hoofs, we should have plenty of better stuff that the army buyers will be glad to take off our hands. They'll be combin' the country by the fall," he predicted.

The more he heard of the project, the more the lanky one liked it. None of his friends needed telling that he was bored to extinction by being cooped up in a store. Only one consideration held him back.

"If I could find a buyer fer my stock here, I'd shore go along——"

"Buyer?" Hunch scoffed with a chuckle. "Yuh mean somebody to give it to, don't yuh? Why, one good spread for a bunch of hungry cow-pokes would clean out all the civilized eatables yuh got here. . . For as that goes," he added, "what's the matter with puttin' on a banquet ourselves before we pull out?"

Alarm leaped into Candy's face as Hunch swung himself up on the counter and began to reach down the dusty cans. He made no protest, however.

"Hm'm, peaches—ox-heart cherries," Hunch said, reading the labels. "Them ought to go pretty good. Here, catch!" He tossed a can to Carver and another to Tex.

Fortunately an assortment of crackers and cookies was found, along with some can-openers. More cans were handed around. Before Candy had time to realize what was happening, the impromptu banquet was in full swing. It swept his objections away. The next moment he joined the feast with the same reckless enthusiasm the others displayed.

An open can of pears in his hand, Hunch was still reading the labels on the high shelves, mumbling to himself with his mouth half full.

"Borax," he grunted. "What in time did anybody want to be movin' the desert way up here for, in little cans?"

"What's that bunch of stuff over there," Skip pointed with cookie-laden hand. Hunch had a look.

"A-n-c-h-o-v-i-e-s," he spelt out. "What in hell ——?"

"They're fer eatin'," Candy averred positively. "Never sold any, but the gent who sold me the place said they was .... Some kind of grubs or somethin'," he hazarded.

A disgusted expression appeared on Hunch's visage, but Skip said "Toss 'em down! I'll try anything once. The Lord wouldn't let me be poisoned with my fortune assured as a wild-hoss hunter!"

He deftly caught the can Hunch tossed to him. A moment later he had it open. His assurance began to melt as he looked at its contents, but with the others bandying gibes, he would not back down. Every one watched him, arrested, as he balanced an anchovy atop a cookie and popped it into his mouth. Two bites, and Skip rushed for the door with a squawk of alarm.

"A-a-a-gh! I'm done for!" he exclaimed as he disappeared. He was back immediately. "Somebody gimme a can of them peaches, while I git this rotten taste out of my mouth!"

They could not forbear laughing at him. He flung them a reproachful look, scooping up the peaches. But by the time the can had joined the growing heap of empties in the middle of the floor, he had regained his usual good humour.

Candy turned to Carver.

"Yuh said you'd be able to outfit without any trouble," he reminded. "How soon kin we git started?"

"We'll fill our packs in Medicine Dance," Jim answered, "and keep right on going. . . . Nothing you've got to take care of first, is there?"

Sims disclaimed any such necessity. "Sooner I git foggin' the wild ones, the better," he declared.

"Same here," Hunch seconded, tucking a three-decker cracker and cheese sandwich in his mouth. "I jest hope nothin' comes of our chousin' around that outlaw country up there in the Tetons," he added soberly.

It was a direct about-face from his former stand, and they jeered him, grinning.

"Old Hunch's famous expecter is workin' again," Tex laughed. "We ought to have a purty good season, Jim——"

But Candy was suspicious. He perceived that Wheeler's previous assurances had been more for the sake of

persuading him than because Hunch believed them himself. "Know any reason why we shouldn't go up there?" he demanded.

"A man's in danger no matter what he does in this world," Hunch grumbled. "Takin' a deep breath may be a mistake, if he swallows his tongue——"

"Jest be careful yuh don't swaller that cherry can," Skip retorted tolerantly. "Way you open yore mouth once in a while's enough to scare anybody."

Steadily the stock of cans on the shelves was depleted, until they could find nothing more which appealed to their sated appetites.

"Dang good thing," Tex growled. "Half-a-dozen more olives or another cracker or two an' I'd bust anyway. I feel's if I'd swallered a rock——" He belched loudly.

"What yuh mean?" Candy bristled. "All that stuff yuh was eatin' at my expense was good grub. I notice yuh didn't make no kick while it was goin' down!"

"Go 'way," Tex told him, waving his hand. "You an' Hunch make me feel sorry I got a mouth. What I need now is some exercise—an' I don't mean with my tongue."

"Tex's right," Hunch declared. "Why not hit fer Medicine Dance right now, Jim? I couldn't sleep till this swellin' goes down a little, anyway."

Carver nodded.

"The sooner we get on the ground, the quicker we stand to make ourselves a few dollars," he said. "If we reach town by morning, and buy our supplies, in another two days we ought to be in the hills."

Skip, who had said nothing, but who still seemed able to find room for a bite or two more, tilted the last gulp of peach juice into his mouth and tossed the can on the pile with the others.

"Well, we ain't leavin' much behind," he commented, slapping his stomach till it resounded like a taut drumhead. "I reckon the pack-rats kin have the rest——"

There was a noticeable awkwardness of movement among them all as they swung into the saddle after Candy had turned the key in the lock for the last time. It was late afternoon, the mocking-birds skimming the sage and the shadows long, as they set out over the stage trail in the direction of town.

CHAPTER II

HALF-A-DOZEN miles from Carver's ranch on the Stepping Stone, the lofty Tetons raised their ragged, snow-crowned heads to the Wyoming sky. North and south as far as the eye could see the rugged mountain barrier ran, an impregnable wall of stone. On the west slope, horses had run wild as long as men could remember. It was an ideal range. The high valleys gave sanctuary in summer from all but the panthers, and in the foothills there was always good grazing to be had through the winter.

Few men visited this remote country at any time, and these—a traper or two, the remnants of a hold-up gang evading the law—usually for a purpose in no way connected with the wild mustangs. Fierce and wary as hawks though they were, the horses proved so plentiful that little difficulty beyond that connected with outwitting them was experience in their capture.

Carver and the others had arrived in the country a week back. Already they had had exceptional luck. Several small bands of the wild ones had been cornered and driven into Carver's J. C. pens. Looking over the percentage of good sound stock in the catch, the latter had professed himself more than satisfied.

To-day an even larger haul was planned, the five spreading through the hills to strategic positions. The band they intended driving had already been spotted. Carver himself, with Hunch and Candy, were to drift the wild stallion and his bunch toward Grizzly Canyon, and Skip and Tex were on their way there now. They would place themselves at the mouth of a box canyon into which the horses were to be shunted when they came thundering down-canyon.

"Sure is typical owlhoot range," Skip remarked, looking about him. His glance took in the lofty crags, and the tall spruce clothing the high canyon walls. "A man could lose hisself in here an' not be seen for months——"

"He shore could," Tex nodded agreement. "Reckon they're in here, too. But we ain't seen hide nor hair of 'em, an' we ain't likely to. A man don't need to be seen in this country unless he wants to."

Passing up Grizzly's leisurely ascent, they came at last to the nameless side canyon in which Carver had said they would try to trap the wild horses.

"It'll be two, three hours before they show up," said Skip, rolling a smoke and licking it. He struck a light.

"We might's well take it easy till there's somethin' doin'," Tex assented. "I'm goin' to climb the slope there an' have a seat."

Suiting action to the words, he was soon some distance up the canyon-side. There he sat down, planting his back against a rock in luxurious comfort. Skip followed suit.

"Shore is quiet," Tex observed, when they had smoked for a moment in silence. It was as he said. Except for the screech of a magpie in a distant gnarled pine, the peace of this place was profound. It did not weigh upon them. For years their work had carried them deep into the silences, until mute love and trust had been born in them almost without their knowledge.

Finishing their cigarettes, they fell into talk while waiting. Skip's interest was all for the outlaws who made this wild mountain refuge their home.

"Who do yuh s'pose is hidin' out here now?" he queried.

Tex didn't know. "Reb Battle's crowd had a hide-out somewhere on the Snake several years ago," he supplied. "Even did some of their jobs from there. But I reckon they've pulled out long ago."

He picked up a handful of pebbles as he talked on, and fell to tossing them at random. There was a badger hole nearby. Tex tried to throw a stone into it, failed, and tried again. This time he was more successful. The stone, disappearing into the hole, elicited a metallic *ping!*

Both noticed it, but the subject was too engrossing to be abandoned. Tex continued his narrative of the fortunes of Reb Battle's crowd, which had been at times a long-riding outfit, again road agents, and at still another time stock thieves. He continued to toss his pebbles. When his second made a bull's eye in the badger hole, and again they heard that hollow, metallic *ping*, he broke off abruptly.

"What in hell is that, anyhow?" he grumbled, getting up to investigate. "Sounds like I hit a tin can or somethin' . . . . By grab, it *is* a can," he continued, a moment later, as his fingers groping in the hole closed over the object. He hauled it out.

It was an old coffee container, such as appeared in almost every ranch kitchen at one time or another.

"Either the dang badger dug it up," Skip hazarded, "or he was tryin' to take it home with him." He looked up, his brows lifting with surprise at his own thought; for not even he could supply any reason why such a thing would have been buried where a badger might unearth it. "Anything in it?"

Tex shook it. It gave forth a rustling sound. He said: "Shore there's somethin' in it. Heavy enough, anyway . . . dang thing's rusted shut," he added as it resisted his effort to pull the cover off.

Even when he produced his jacknife and began to pry with it, he did not believe he would find anything of importance inside. Probably a wad of papers, he reflected.

The cover came off suddenly, a moment later, flying a number of feet and rolling down the slope. Neither noticed it. They were staring at the contents of the can, their eyes bugged out.

"My hell," Skip breathed, when he found his voice. "Is it—real?"

Tex fished out the fat roll of paper currency tied with a dirty string, an inscrutable expression on his seamed face.

"It's real enough," he grunted, fingering the greasy bills. Suddenly he dropped the roll between his knees as he squatted there, taking a quick look about. He lowered his voice. "Question is, how'd it git here?"

Skip could find no answer. He was not particularly interested at the moment, all his attention fastened on the money. "There ain't nobody around," he scoffed impatiently. "Let's see how much there is there——"

He reached for the roll, but Tex pushed him back.

"Don't git nervous," the latter growled. "We'll find out quick enough." Quickly breaking the string, he fell to leafing over the bills. Incredulity slowly overspread their faces as the total mounted.

"Sixty-seven hundred dollars!" said Tex awesomely, sinking back on his heels when he was finished. His eyes met Skip's and held. "It's a fortune——"

Neither would have cared to put into words the thought flashing through their minds at that moment. Tex silently retied the roll, his hands trembling slightly.

Skip muttered: "It's some owlhoot's cache——"

"Must be," the other nodded. "Hold on, though. Thought I saw a paper with the money. I forgot all about

that." He picked up the coffee can. A second later he was unfolding a paper which had been in the bottom of the can. Skip pressed closer to see.

At first glance it appeared to be some sort of map. But it was like none they had ever seen before. The paper was water-stained, the markings faded. Tex squinted as he strove to make them out.

"T-r-e-e'" he spelled out, and: "H-o-r-s-e H-e-a-d-e-d R-o-c-k. . . What in hell yuh make of that?" Before Skip could say anything, he pursued: "Here's another. 'Forty paces,' it says—an' then 'three feet.' What's that mean?"

Skip puzzled over it for a long moment in silence. Any way he might turn the paper made the markings no clearer. But his mind was busy.

"Sounds like another cache or somethin'," he suggested. "Does that make sense?"

"Might," Tex answered doubtfully. "It's a damn cinch it don't mean marbles."

Skip gave up finally. "It ain't in my language," he confessed. "There ain't even nothin' to show where this tree, an' the rock that looks like a horse, can be found . . . . It's a cache all right," he went on with strengthening conviction. "That's why it's so dang mysterious, I expect. There's millions of trees around here. The rock's the only thing yuh could go by——"

"Wal," Tex broke in, "we don't have to do no huntin' fer this here money, anyways——"

Skip paused, gazing at him. Suddenly his lean face broke into a broad grin. "Dammit all, Tex—we're rich!" he exulted. "No more foggin' the wild ones fer us! We kin go to Denver, New York—maybe Paris! We'll——" He stopped short, and an expression of hesitancy came to replace the grin. "Yuh reckon it *is* ours?" he queried. "We kin keep it——?"

"Why not?" Tex demanded. "Found it, didn't we? . . . I'd like to see somebody try to take it away from me!"

Skip said: "We could tell Jim——"

"Unh-uh," Tex cut him off. "Carver ain't goin' to know nothin' about this—not that I'd object to his havin' a cut, if he'd take it. But Jim wouldn't. First thing he'd want to do would be to take the money straight to some sheriff. We'd never see any of it again."

"No, that won't do," Skip agreed, his brow clearing.

"No sense in tossin' it away. But how'll we make him an' the others think we come by it honest?" The irony in his choice of words did not occur to him, nor to Tex.

"We kin hide the money till one of us makes an excuse to ride to town," the latter said. "It won't be no job to cook up some story about an uncle dyin' up in Montana an' leavin' us his wad. We kin git a letter fixed up that'll make it look right. . . . It better be yore uncle, though," he continued thoughtfully. "If mine ain't all died long ago, they ought to've."

They were still talking it over when they heard a rattling of rocks far down the main canyon. Both started up, tense. Then Tex relaxed.

"It's the wild ones comin'," he muttered. "We better git busy——"

They lost no time in swinging aboard their horses and making for the floor of the canyon.

"Not a word of this to anybody, mind," Johnson tossed over his shoulder warningly. Skip gave him a scornful look, and then he grinned. He was in excellent spirits. . . . Sixty-seven hundred dollars! He kept repeating it to himself, unable to imagine a greater sum. But for having seen it with his own eyes, he would scarcely have believed in its reality. But it was real enough. It made a distressingly obvious bump in Tex's pocket, which he could only hope the others would fail to notice.

There wasn't time to go on thinking about it, however. A moment later the wild bunch hove in sight, skimming the rocks like eagles, a spirited dun stallion at their head. Skip's breath sucked in when he saw that horse. There was something in him that always answered to fine horseflesh.

Tex felt the same way. But he didn't waste any time staring, his wits busy.

"Keep back till they're clost!" he called sharply. "We don't want 'em to turn back down the canyon!"

They clung to their posts as the wild horses thundered near. There must be eighteen or twenty head in that bunch. Skip kept a tight grip on himself. He waited for Tex's signal. Suddenly Tex waved an arm.

They jumped their mounts into the open at the same time. Both yelled, firing their guns skyward. They had taken up positions near the centre of the canyon, just opposite the mouth of the box canyon. The wild broncs were taken

completely by surprise. All their attention concentrated on the persistent pursuit from the rear, they had not expected their enemies to the fore. They whirled, snorting, the dust boiling up. The stallion whistled shrilly.

"Shove 'em hard!" Tex bawled to Carver, Candy and Hunch, who were fogging up canyon. "Don't let 'em git their wits!"

Like Skip, he was afraid lest the wild ones stampede and make a blind rush. If they did, they were almost certain to get away. The stallion held his band bunched, warily tossing his head. A few seconds would serve for him to make up his mind. Driving home the spurs, Tex abruptly charged.

With snorts of fright, the wild horses whirled and broke. Only one clear road lay open, that leading into the blind canyon. They took it, their hoofs ringing on the rocks. Carver and the others came up in time to drive them on till their capture was assured. At last Jim turned back, a grin on his lean perspiring face.

"Good work, boys," he complimented briefly.

"Some good stuff in that bunch," Candy averred. "Yuh see that dun stallion? Danged if I wouldn't like to own that big devil myself——"

The others assented cheerfully. "Reckon we made a rich haul this trip," Tex seconded, pretending great interest. "We better start slappin' some brush wings acrost the mouth of this canyon in a hurry!"

Under Carver's direction it was soon accomplished. From then on, getting a few of the wild horses out at a time and hazing them down to the J.C. was only a matter of work. It was work at which they were one and all adept, and a late hour of the following day saw them ready for another drive.

When Skip began to hint about a trip to Medicine Dance, that night in the kitchen of Carver's tumble-down ranch house, Tex shunted him away from the subject. The latter had read their leader's mood aright. Jim had been working like three men, and was in a frame of mind for a quick clean-up. Moreover, with things gonig as smoothly as this, there was no danger of dissension arising. Anxious as he was to lay claim to the wad of money which he had taken pains to conceal carefully at the first opportunity, the grizzled one was well aware that the hour had not yet struck.

It was a week later, and three days had passed without

so much as a broken down broomtail having been spotted, before a chance came. Then, as luck would have it, Tex and Skip got away together. Carver made no demur to their departure for town, in fact, he seemed to favour it, for in his hard-headed way Tex had always kept an eye on Skip, and Jim believed it was done in such a way that the kid failed to notice.

The pair were gone overnight. Riding up to the ranch late the following afternoon, they found the others there, saddle-weary and growing disgruntled. Only Carver appeared untroubled.

"We've been foggin' the wild ones for two weeks and over without a let-up," he said. "They're all spooked up. We'll give them a chance to cool down a little."

"Unh-uh, not us," Skip responded. "Reckon we're all done chasin' the wild babies." He exchanged a secret glance with Tex, grinning from ear to ear.

Caught by his tone, Carver and Hunch Wheeler and Candy stared for a moment in silence. Candy said suspiciously:

"Huh? What's this?"

Carver was more deliberate. "What are you talking about?" he demanded, with a touch of impatience.

Skip drew a paper from his pocket. "There was a letter waitin' for me in town. It's from a lawyer——" He had their close attention now. "My grandpap in Iowa died an' left me his place—not the farm itself; that's been sold to satisfy some small claims—but its value in hard cash! The lawyer says I kin have it by wirin' proof of identity!" He beamed on them, waiting for their response.

Jim was the first to recover from his surprise. He said: "Why—that's great, Skip! I'm glad to hear it. It means you'll be well off——"

Hunch was not so tactful. "Yuh mean yo're leavin' us?" he demanded flatly. "What about Tex here? His granddad ain't died too, an' left him a wad, has he?"

Skip grew self-conscious. "Well . . . fact is, Tex an' me have been talkin' this over. I aim to buy a little spread, mebby, an' Tex is goin' to throw in with me. Any reason why we shouldn't do that?" he broke off, bristling.

Carver smiled at his earnestness, mistaking its cause. "No reason at all, Skip," he hastened to assure. "Don't let the boys get you riled. I expect you could do what you

wanted—you and Tex—even if you didn't have a bunch of money coming."

But Lang chose to pretend that the validity of his inheritance was in question. "It *is* comin'!" he declared. "There ain't any question about it. Here—read the letter, if yuh don't believe me!" He held the letter out. He had no hesitation in offering it, for he and Tex had laboured long over its composition. But no one evinced especial interest.

"I knowed it," Hunch was grumbling discontentedly. "There goes our wild hoss haul all t' blazes. What kin the three of us do?"

Carver laughed at him. "Three won't be as handy as five, by a long shot," he admitted frankly; "but none of us have lost an arm or a leg yet . . . . don't pay any attention to him," he advised Tex and Skip easily. "We'll make out all right."

If he spoke positively, Hunch was not appeased. "It ain't that," he growled. "It's jest that our luck's changed. I kin feel it. Some things are goin' to happen that none of us is goin' to like; an' they won't be long in comin', either—you mark my words!"

Such earnestness as his would have impressed any one, but they made an effort to brush it aside. "Where do yuh feel all this comin' on, Hunch—in yore tummy?" Candy gibed. "Because if yuh do, mebby it's yore supper yo're needin'."

Hunch shook his head ominously. "Laugh all yuh want," he insisted doggedly. "I'm never wrong about such things as this. If yuh don't believe me, jest wait an' see!"

"Since we've got no choice in the matter," Tex drawled, "we'll jest do that, Hunchie!"

CHAPTER III

SKIP and Tex remained overnight, but they got ready to pull away in the morning. The kid said he had wired from Medicine Dance for his money; he didn't want to miss being there when it came.

"In an all-fired sweat, ain't yuh?" Hunch demanded. "Got yore spread all picked out, I s'pose?"

Skip said: "Why, uh—there's a little place over on Midnight Creek that we like the looks of. I ain't decided yet.

But there ain't no reason why I should stall it off. Is there?"

Hunch ignored the query.

"Yuh mean that old abandoned place we passed here a week or ten days ago?" he demanded, scoffingly. "That ain't no place to take if yuh got money." He pointed out a dozen disadvantages, to all of whcih Skip listened in irritated silence.

"Who's buyin' the place—me or you?" he retorted at last. "Sure, I could go over in Wind River Basin, or the Jackson Hole country, like yuh said. But I like it over here. Can't sink all my cash in range, anyway. I got a bunch of cow critters to buy."

Now that the others had accepted unquestioningly his story of where the money had come from, he began to enjoy his rôle and to throw himself into it with zest. It tickled him to see Tex wince and look disgusted at all this talk of where *he* was going and what *he* was going to buy.

They pulled out a few minutes later.

"We won't say good-bye," Carver decided. He had brought himself to a state of honest pleasure in the good fortune of his friends. "If you settle on Midnight, we'll be seeing you once in a while. Besides, there's your cut of the stuff we've already gathered——"

Skip waved a hand in lofty disposal.

"Forget it," he said. "You boys've worked hard enough, an' I don't need it."

"That's true," Jim assented. "If you feel that way about it, I'm obliged. But what about Tex——?"

Johnson was biting his moustache to think that it had been he who, after all, had actually found the money. He said shortly: "Thanks, Jim. I'll get along. Whenever I'm up against it I'll come to yuh."

"You do that," Carver nodded.

Jogging towards Medicine Dance, Tex chewed the cud of his reflections, a sober look on his gaunt face.

"What's eatin' yuh?" Skip demanded finally.

Tex took his time about answering. "Yuh laid it on purty thick, kid," he said gruffly. Skip stared at him.

"What if I did? Had to back up my yarn, didn't I? Don't tell me yuh changed yore mind——"

"No," Tex denied, shaking his head. "We'll go through with it as we planned . . . an' there ain't no sense in our quarrellin' about it now, neither," he added sensibly.

They subsided after that, pushing on towards town. Nor were they going there for the reason given, but to learn the name of the owner of the little spread on Midnight Creek. With their knowledge of a second cache of money buried somewhere in the hills, they had no intention of leaving. The place would make an ideal headquarters for their search, which they suspected would be a long one, despite the fact that they would be forced to buy a few head of steers as a blind for their real object.

Dan Hacker was the least of the two attorneys Medicine Dance afforded, with a well-nigh abandoned practice, and the shrewd, blotched face of a habitual drinker who has not yet relinquished the last shreds of his self-respect. Such offices as he had were in the little rooms above the Idaho Supply Company's store where he made his home.

He was in when Tex and Skip thumped up the wooden stairs and knocked at his door.

"What yuh want?" he demanded, scrutinizing them with sharp distrust—for it was to him that range men were in the habit of coming when they got themselves in trouble. Not that he had any leaning towards that kind of work.

Tex said: "We want to buy a little spread, Hacker. Mebby yuh kin help us out——"

Dan grunted. "Come in," he said grudgingly. He made room for them by brushing books and old clothes off a couple of chairs, and listened to their story.

"The old place on Midnight Creek?" he said. "Kize Everill had it for a while. Nick Bullard took it over. He couldn't make a go of it either. I dunno who owns it now." He peered at them from beneath shaggy brows. "Are yuh serious about this, or jest nosin' around?"

They assured him that they were serious. Hacker buttoned his soiled shirt collar and shrugged on his coat.

"Wait here," he directed. "I'll step over and see what the county records have to say."

He was gone a matter of twenty minutes. Finally they heard his uncertain step on the stair.

"Bullard still owns it," he said when he came in. "If we're lucky, we'll see him to-night. He generally drops in town on Saturday nights. . . . There's back taxes on the Padlock place," he continued. "If you're willin' to pay them, you can likely git it from Bullard fer a song. He was jest lettin' it slide."

"Then if we see him to-night, we'll talk turkey," Tex said. "We're dependin' on yuh to keep the price down as low as yuh can, Hacker," he concluded as he and Skip got up to go.

Dan nodded. He had no questions to put; no interest in why they wanted the old ranch.

"I'll be around," he promised.

Bullard did put in an appearance that evening. Tex and Skip promptly accosted him. They had no difficulty in persuading him to sell the place on Midnight Creek. Hunting up the lawyer at once, the men went into details and the transaction was soon completed.

There was frank astonishment in the rancher's face as he counted out the fifteen hundred dollars which Tex handed him on the spot. "The Padlock is wuth more," he declared; "but likely the taxes will amount to as much ag'in by this time; reckon I'm lucky you an' Lang came along, Johnson. Yuh must want the place mighty bad," he hazarded, glancing up keenly.

They were not giving out any information, however. "We'll try to make it pay fer itself," was all Tex answered. He had prudently refrained from flashing the remainder of the money, and was glad he had done so. It was not often that a couple of thirty-dollar punchers turned up with the wherewithal to buy a spread, even one of the size of the Padlock; and he wanted no questions asked. Experience had taught him that even the best of stories had a way of breaking down under too close scrutiny.

He and Skip rode out to Midnight Creek the following day with a wagon-load of supplies. The place they had bought was a two-room affair, old and neglected, with several bunks built into the wall of the inner room. There were few conveniences, but they did not mind. They had looked the place over while horse hunting, and knew exactly what they were getting. They were soon settled in.

"Reckon this is somethin' like!" Skip exulted, stepping outside and examining their little domain with wholly approving eye. The long house stood on a grassy flat beside the brawling, rock-fanged creek. Pure as crystal, that water was, and cold as ice, tumbling down from the lofty heights which loomed skywards almost in their very dooryard. "Reckon it's goin' to be purty soft for us from now on!"

"Don't be so shore of that," Tex warned. "First

thing we do is to git some steers out here an' make it look like a real ranch. And we ain't wastin' no time about it."

"I ain't in no danger of forgettin'," Skip admitted, hauled up short.

It was a fortnight before they had a few hundred head of white-faces on their range, fast as they worked. They began to breathe easier then. Not for a moment had they overlooked the fact that there were owlhoots in this country who .might be expected to evince interest in their sudden affluence—particularly when it was learned that the badger-hole cache had been robbed. Once established, they felt safe. As Tex pointed out, little cowmen were as common as dirt, the last thing in the world to excite any one's interest on this part of the range. Moreover, it had occurred to them that the disappearance of the cache might well be blamed on the badger.

Once matters were in full swing and a slack spell arrived, they turned their attention to the mysterious map. Since its discovery, however, Tex had come to the conclusion that it would not be as easy to solve as they had hoped.

"We're takin' a lot fer granted," he reminded Skip one evening, as they sat smoking before their door. "There's no proof that it means another cache. I'm admittin' I've got a hunch it does, all right. But even if I'm right, how do we know it ain't on some other range?"

Skip agreed reluctantly. "It won't do no hurt for us to hunt around," he argued.

They did, in however desultory a fashion. Several days were spent in search of a horse-headed rock, their only identifiable landmark. There were millions of rocks within half-a-dozen miles of their spread, but not one, as far as they could discover, which might be tortured by any stretch of he imagination into the likeness of a horse's head. Gradually their ardour cooled.

"Like as not we won't have no luck huntin'— an' then some day we'll jest stumble on to it by accident," Skip remarked hopefully. Tex's smile was wry.

"Wal, hope don't cost nothin'," he returned.

They had one last whirl at it, taking the map along as usual for reference. Pausing in a little valley for another look at it, their ponies side by side, their heads together, they would have been considerably interested to know that a man concealed on the slope above was watching their every move. He failed

to reveal himself as they moved on, but Tex, whose senses had been sharpened by years of hard range experience, had the indefinable feeling that something was wrong. He kept glancing about suspiciously. Finally Skip noticed it.

"What's the matter with yuh?" he demanded. "See a ghost?"

"No," the grizzled one responded, lowering his tone; "an' I don't aim to, neither." He appeared to be turning something over in his mind. At length he spoke again. "Reckon I'll jog down to the J.C. an' see how Jim an' the others are gittin' on——"

"Huh?" Skip was surprised. "Yuh mean yo're givin' up?"

"Call it that——"

Skip tried to argue him out of it, to no avail. "Might's well go along with yuh," he grumbled.

They made short work of the ride to Carver's J. C. and by good luck found their friends at the ranch. Matters had gone well with them; the corrals were practically jammed with wild horses. Many were culls, runty and inbred, their hoofs ruined by alkali; but there were a number of excellent horses as well. Carver expressed his confidence that they would be far ahead by the end of the season. No army buyers had put in an appearance as yet, but he was not worrying.

They talked for an hour before Tex and Skip got ready to return to their own ranch, and even then the older man was plainly reluctant to pull away. Skip eyed him with growing puzzlement.

"You got somethin' on yore mind," he declared, when they turned up the hills at last. "What is it?"

"If I'm right, we'll find out soon 'nough," was the terse answer. "If not, there ain't no use in worryin' about it." Nor would Tex add anything to that.

Skip found cause to remember his words no later than the following morning, when a man rode up as they were getting breakfast. They heard the stamp of his horse's hoofs.

"Who can that be?" Skip queried. "Jim or the others woudn't be over here at this hour, unless somebody's hurt——"

Busy at the moment with the flapjacks, he did not step to the door at once. Tex was similarly occupied. Before

either of them expected anything of the kind, the newcomer appeared in the door and stopped there. Arrested, they stared at him.

He was young, brawny, sandy haired, with a broken nose set crookedly in a rocky face, and eyes like blue ice. Neither had ever laid eyes on him before. There was a moment's tension, during which Tex's gnarled hands were absolutely still; then a slow grin of welcome overspread his face.

"Come on in, stranger," he invited. "Grub pile's ready. Yuh kin have a bite with us——"

There was no change in the man's expressionless face. He waited till Johnson had set the coffee pot on the table and rubbed his stinging fingers on his levis. Then his trap-like slit of a mouth opened and flat words came.

"All I want from you boys is easy got . . . hand it over!"

Skip stiffened. Something vaguely familiar about this man, which had irked him from the moment of his arrival, suddenly became knowledge. There could be no mistaking that clipped speech or the wary manner for long. The sandy-haired one was an outlaw. What he was after was equally plain.

If Tex had likewise got it all in a flash, he chose not to show it.

"Huh?" he said, putting on a blank look. "Yore talk ain't plain to us, stranger. Hand over what?"

Sandy Hair gimleted him with opaque eyes. "Come on, come on!" he rapped sharply. "I ain't got all day to be foolin' around. Trot out the map!"

A silence descended on the kitchen that stretched out taut as a bowstring. Even while he groped for an answer, Tex was narrowly measuring his chances.

"The money——" he began.

"Never mind the money!" the answer whipped out. "I kin see where that went—an' it'll be waitin' when we want it. Fork over the map. Hustle!" There was a foreboding note in the words.

"Map?" Tex echoed. "What map yuh talkin' about?"

"The map I seen yuh starin' at so hard yesterday in the hills," the man told him, flashing a grin. "I saw yuh wasn't makin' head or tail of it, so yuh won't be wantin' it no more.

Maybe," he added thinly, "it's a good thing for you that's the way it is!"

Tex shook his head slowly.

"That wasn't no map," he denied. "It was a hand-bill we picked up—a reward dodger some sheriff had printed." He watched narrowly for a sign that his shot had told. Sandy Hair only evinced impatience. His visage hardened.

"If you ain't willin' to hand it over," he said, "I reckon it can be took off yore dead body——"

"If yuh knows so much about it, an' if it's a map, then what's it all about?" Skip threw in. "An' how do we know it belongs to yuh, anyhow?"

Tiring of words, Sandy Hair's hand began to steal towards his gun.

"Don't yuh do it!" Tex warned sharply. But he perceived that their sparring was done. This man meant to get what he had come after, if not by bluff, then by any means necessary.

"*Do I git the map?*"

The question snapped and crackled. In their stubborn faces Sandy Hair read his answer. Suddenly bursting into curses, he went for his gun.

"Git behind the stove!" Tex bawled at Skip in the split-second before anything could happen. Instead of complying, Lang flung himself at full length on the floor. Tex himself dived sidewise, drawing and firing as he did so.

His shot, and the outlaw's, sounded almost as one. Sandy Hair's slug grazed his ribs; but at the same instant he saw a ragged hole appear in the man's throat. Sandy Hair lurched round, amazement visiting his face. He tried to level his gun again, even as his knees started to buckle. The next moment he struck the rammed dirt floor with a sodden thud.

Tex slammed into the log wall and hung there, waiting, his gun at the ready. But a moment passed and nothing happened. Skip sat up, beads of perspiration on his forehead at the suddenness of it all. On hands and knees, then, he had a closer look at the outlaw. Tex heard his breath suck in, and finally exhale.

"What the hell!" Skip exclaimed in a tone of alarm. "Yuh killed him, Tex! He's deader'n a mackerel!"

CHAPTER IV

FOR the space of ten seconds they gazed at each other silently. Then Tex straightened.

"What of it?" he grunted. "He's an owlhoot. Prob'ly the law would thank us fer rubbin' him out. But it ain't necessary that anybody should know. We'll git rid of him, an' it'll never be heard of again."

"Supposin' all that is true," Skip objected; "what about this gent's friends——?"

Tex nodded acknowledgment of the point. His wits were busy.

"He'll have some pals," he admitted. "But have even they gotta know? . . . They don't know, at least yet," he proceeded cannily, "or why didn't some of 'em come with him? He spotted us in the hills yestiday with the map, all right. He admitted that. Mebby he was figgerin' to git it an' keep it to himself."

The knowledge that they had been watched made Skip uneasy. "They may be scoutin' the place right now," he said darkly. But Tex didn't think so.

"If I'm right, this map *does* mean another cache; an' if Sandy Hair *was* figgerin' to keep it fer himself, he'd make shore he wasn't follered here," he pointed out.

"That won't prevent us from bein' spotted if we pack him into the hills to bury him——"

"We ain't buryin' him," Tex retorted. "If we did that, it'd shore as hell backfire on us." At Skip's mystified look, he shook his head shrewdly. "We gotta be lots wiser'n that, Skip—an' we will."

"Jest how?"

Tex said: "First, yuh kin snag this bird's hoss an' put it in the barn, where it won't be seen. We'll jest see what the day brings."

He would vouchsafe no more. Grumbling, Skip did as he said. They wrapped Sandy Hair in a blanket, and tumbled him into a bunk, after which they cleaned up the blood where he had fallen. It was no easy task to remain at the house all day and appear at ease, while at the same time they kept a strict watch.

As it turned out, no one at all came near them. Towards evening, Tex said: "Reckon we're safe now. Fetch the gent's hoss an' we'll give him ride."

They tied Sandy Hair across his own saddle, and then mounting, started into the hills. Tex led the way, keeping to the rocky going where tracks would not show. On a rough trail overlooking the deep gorg of an almost impenetrable canyon, he drew up.

"Git the ropes off him, an' that blanket," he growled. It was quickly done. To Skip's amazement, Tex tumbled Sandy Hair to the fanyon's edge and gave him a shove. The body rolled over once or twice, gathering momentum swiftly, and striking a rock below, bounded off into space.

"Now," said Tex. "Leave that bronc here with his reins trailin'—or better still, lead him off a couple hundred yards an' snag the reins in the brush. Then we'll git goin'." He watched critically as Skip complied. "Slip that cinch, an' let the saddle slide around underneath——"

Skip perceived his intention now. Were horse or rider to be found, any one would have said he had been thrown to his death. The terrible fall down the canyon-side would account fully for his torn throat. Any one of a hundred pine snags down there might have done it. . . . Skip shuddered slightly, staring about him in the gathering dusk. He did not need telling that, had any part of their day's work been witnessed, it would spell a fate even more violent than Sandy Hair's had proved.

Not till they reached the ranch once more did they breathe easily. The night passed uneventfully. Sandy Hair had been the first man Skip had ever seen killed with a gun. But violent death was not unknown to him; and as he stood in the door after breakfast, picking his teeth, it could be seen that he was once more in a philosophical frame of mind concerning the affair.

"It may be the best thing that could've happened," he observed. "If that hombre saw us with the map, he was bound to make trouble sooner or later. . . . It jest goes to show a man can't be too careful," he went on after a reflective pause. "We've been spotted once, an' ten to one we will be again. That map——"

Tex nodded soberly. "Yeh. That map."

"Who in hell made it?" Skip wondered aloud. "The minute that feller saw us with it, he knew what it was. But it's plain there don't nobody know what's in it but us."

Tex assented again. "We got to find that cache before somebody beats us to it," he said. Skip stared at him.

"Yuh mean they'd try to git the map away from us?"

Tex shrugged.

"One of 'em did."

"But if the others don't know about it——"

"It ain't safe figgerin' what they know, or don't know," Tex declared. He added: "I'd hate to have two or three of 'em come bustin' in here some night an' smoke us up."

Skip's brows drew down with the intensity of his thinking. Finally he looked up. "We could hide it——"

Tex said: "Uh-uh. That don't work so good. . . . . Reckon we better ride down an' see Jim again."

"But yuh ain't tellin' him anything?" Skip said quickly.

"That won't be necessary."

Before starting, they laid the map on the table and studied it carefully. It was all there just as they remembered it; Skip felt that he could close his eyes and still see the markings. He knew neither of them would ever wholly forget. Tex tucked the map in an old envelope and licked the seal.

In outward appearance, their ride to the J.C. was the most casual of jaunts. Carver was surprised to see them again so soon, but he said nothing. Work was going on at the corrals to-day. Skip and Tex threw themselves into it for an hour. Banter flew back and forth as one after another, they climbed the corral fence to rest.

At noon Skip began to grow impatient. At his importunate signs, Tex said they would ride back up the hills. Getting ready to leave, he pulled the envelope from his pocket and handed it to Carver.

"Will yuh keep that for me, Jim?" he asked. Carver assented at once.

"Glad to do it for you, Tex."

He did not ask what was in the envelope, nor did Tex offer an explanation. "Jest stick it in a safe place," was all he said. "I wouldn't want it to git lost."

"It'll be here when you ask for it," Jim assured him.

"Yuh don't think he'll git curious, do yuh?" Skip asked, as they rode away. Tex was scornful.

"If he does, it'll be fer the first time where anybody's business but his own is concerned. I'll vouch fer that."

They lost no time in setting about their search for the second cache. Their previous hunt had been no more than a desultory casting-about in comparison to the manner in which

they now addressed themselves to their task. Though it was safely out of their hands, the mysterious map often came under discussion, its elusive promise holding them in ever-growing thrall. How much money would they find this time—supposing they succeeded in finding it at all? There was no answer, yet the subject filled many engrossing evenings of talk. Meanwhile they took to riding the range at all hours, in every direction, hunting the horse-headed rock. It had to be on a flat, and not more than forty feet from at least one tree; but there were literally unnumbered rocks in the country which filled these specifications.

A week passed, and they began to realise the size of their undertaking. They refused to give up, however. How many rocks had they tortured into the semblance of a horse's head, in this light or in that, and from one angle or another—always with the same disappointing result. It didn't matter. The right one had to be somewhere; but its location became the subject of some hot arguments.

"I'm tellin' yuh it's higher up in the hills," Tex averred positively, for reasons he would have been hard put to it to explain. "Found the first one in a God-forsaken canyon, didn't we? No use lookin' right near there—that's one patch uh country we kin rule out. We got a power uh ridin' to do, though, before we cover all this big range."

That night they sat on the porch steps at the ranch in gathering dusk, when three men jogged into the yard. Tex's eyes glinted as he saw them. Something about these men, their wary self-control, their hard purposefulness of manner, warned him of what they were.

"Sit right where yuh are," he muttered to Skip. "Don't make a move——"

The three pulled up close at hand. One, obviously their leader, looked down at them sharply.

"Howdy," he said.

There was no cordiality in the greeting. But if he noticed it, Tex ignored the fact.

"Howdy, boys——"

"We're lookin' for a friend. Sandy-haired, good sized feller. His nose was busted. . . . Seen 'im?"

Skip's pulse jumped, then began to hammer. Tex said quietly: "No. He drift down this way?"

One of the three said harshly: "Come on, Bill. Hell, he dunno nothin'!"

The leader was less impatient, however. "You ain't seen anything of 'im?" he persisted. "Ridin' a big bay, with a white stockin'——?"

Tex shook his head, his eyes never leaving the other. "Can't say I have."

There were several more questions, all tending to the same end. Without so much as a "So long" the trio turned their horses and rode out of the yard. Skip and Tex watched till they melted in the shadows.

"That's the real thing—them three," Tex announced in an undertone. Skip knew what he meant.

"Dang queer they waited so long before huntin' fer this sandy-haired pal of theirs," he began. Tex scoffed.

"Don't worry, they found him long ago," he said.

"Then what——"

"They been doin' some thinkin' on their own," Tex went on soberly. "More they think about their partner goin' out that way, the more they wonder. . . . They didn't learn nothin' here," he concluded, with satisfaction.

Skip wished he could feel as sure of that. There had been something in the faces of the three men which had told him they would be bad ones to meet under the wrong circumstances.

"Yuh think they don't know yet that we been huntin' the hills?" he inquired.

"They know," was the answer. "But they dunno what fer——"

"Then yuh think we ought to lay off a day or two?"

"If I quit before findin' this second cache," Tex told him flatly, "it'll have to be fer a better reason 'n that!"

Dubious as Skip was, he did not advocate any material delay. The following morning found them pursuing their quest. For some days they had been working higher up the rugged flank of the Tetons, until Skip had suggested they throw a pack together and take it along. Tex vetoed the nuisance of a third horse, but each had his bed-roll strapped to his cantle to-day, and they rode farther than usual. They had no better luck, however. Evening overtook them a dozen miles from home, and still they had had no glimpse of the horse-headed rock.

"Danged if I know what to make of it," Tex confessed as they prepared their supper. "We're jest wanderin' now.

Why, a man could hunt fer a hundred years an' not cover all this territory."

Skip was in little better spirits. Neither asked himself why they were not satisfied to let well enough alone, accepting fortune as it came to them. Both were so preoccupied by their thoughts that it came as a shock of surprise when, soon after dark, the same three men rode up to their camp who had appeared at the Padlock the previous night.

Caught half-a-dozen paces away from his rifle as he rubbed sand in the skillet, Tex pretended little concern. But getting to his feet slowly, as did Skip, he was alert for every development.

The man called Bill slipped from the saddle. He was tall, broad-shouldered, a ruthless look on his swarthy visage. There was no pretext of formality about him now.

"What are you doin' here in the hills?"

Tex took his time over his answer. He was feeling this thing out.

"Right now we're puttin' in the night——"

"Lookin' for somethin'?" the big fellow cut in.

"Uh—no."

The man stared hard for a full minute. There was no doubt in Skip's mind, or in Tex's that they were on trial. What the outcome would be they didn't know; but it looked plenty bad.

One of the other men, hard, vengeful of eyes, grated: "Okay, Bill—let 'em have it!"

Still Bill delayed. Not that anything stayed his hand save what appeared a habitual indecision of mind. Tex placed him now. He had heard of Bill Stack, Reb Battle's lieutenant before the outlaw had been rubbed out by lawmen here in these very hills. This was Stack. Evidently he had become leader of the band.

He spoke suddenly, throwing the flat words: "You killed our pal——"

Tex froze. He knew it was Sandy Hair that was being referred to. He shook his head slightly, never moving his eyes.

"No."

It was almost a whisper, yet plain enough. Stack went on in that dead level tone:

"You bumped him off, took him into the hills and tossed him down the rocks——"

Again Tex shook his head, feeling death brush him close. Suddenly Stack's voice rose.

"What did you do with the money in that cache you robbed?"

The words came like bullets beating against them. Tex said:

"We never saw it."

Stack swung savagely to Skip. Flicking a glance, Tex saw the kid's face pale. Stack rasped harshly:

"Mebby you'll talk!"

Skip wet his lips. He knew what they were up against. He managed dry words, indicating Tex: "He's said it all——"

One of the other outlaws exclaimed: "Aw, hell——!" It had its unconscious effect on Stack. His eyes darted again to Tex.

"You——" he began. Whatever was on the tip of his togue was never spoken, however. Johnson read the lightning flicker in his steely eyes. Even as Stack went for his gun, Tex drew and fired from the hip, throwing himself sidewise as he did so. His aim wasn't good enough. He saw Stack reel. At the same instant, he felt something hot sear through his chest and shoulder. Falling, he heard the crash of other guns; out of the corner of his eye he saw Skip Lang stumble and go down. The kid had never had a chance. His gun was still only halfway out of the leather.

The cold-bloodedness of it sent a wave of fury over Tex. That it was the end of his string he knew; but it wouldn't prevent him from squaring accounts as nearly as possible. Raising on an elbow, he lifted his Colt. Stack was standing there, blazing away at him. Tex heard the slugs hit him, but strangely he felt nothing. With grim intent he threw down on the man who had drilled Skip. His gun spat luridly in the shadows. At the second shot, he saw the man lurch and begin to sag.

Everything was going dark now. Tex's gun was heavy. He couldn't lift it. Gritting his teeth, he tried desperately—couldn't make it. Thrusting the ground away from him, he raised up to stare at Bill Stack, in the act of firing at him once more.

"Shoot an' be damned, yuh mangy wolf!" he jerked out, breath whistling. "I—squared fer the kid—anyhow!"

He saw Stack's gun muzzle bloom redly, and it was the last thing he did see. With a whoosh of departing breath, he rolled over and lay still.

CHAPTER V

"FUNNY we ain't seen Skip or Tex lately," remarked Hunch Wheeler as he, Candy Sims and Carver set off from the latter's ranch in the early morning. "They got so they was droppin' over regular."

"Busy on the Padlock, probably," Jim gave back, without giving the matter much thought.

Candy shook his head. "Don't think they're home at all," he put in. "I jogged by there yestidy. There wasn't nobody around. Place was closed up tight."

"Taking a trip then," said Carver carelessly. "Skip was saying he might pick up some more stock——"

For some reason, Hunch didn't let it go at that. Evidently he continued to roll things over in his mind, for ten minutes later he said: "I dunno. Somethin' tells me they're in a jam."

Candy's long horse-face widened in a grin. "Feelin' yore oats this mornin', Hunchie?" he queried jovially. Wheeler scowled at him.

"Laugh all yuh want, yuh dang jackass! I tell yuh I got a feelin'——"

"Must be them flapjacks as usual," the lanky one gibed. "Cheer up, Hunch. You'll ride it off."

Hunch subsided into himself. Not again during the day did he have much to contribute in the way of conversation. The others did not notice it; for they split up within a few miles of the J.C., each taking his own trail as they spotted a bunch of wild ones and threw their net for the gather. It was getting to be harder work now, for the broomtails, fogged for a month or more, had grown wary. No longer was it possible to manœuvre them into one of the prepared brush corrals in the foothills. Usually, on sighting the enemy, they turned tail and raced for the high hills flanking the peaks. Carver had had to depend on his sketchy knowledge of blind canyons and rocky cups up there. He knew it would not be long before the game was played out as far as this range was concerned.

It was mid-afternoon before, by dint of reckless riding, they managed to corner the wild bunch—a small one in an arm of a deep, gloomy canyon; and then only because fast work had enabled them to throw up a brush fence at the logical point. Penned, the wild stock milled and stamped about their rocky corral, whistling defiance. But for the splendid roan stallion that led the bunch, and two or three promising three-year-olds, the haul would scarcely have been worth the labour.

It was Candy who spotted a bronc in the bunch which bore saddle-marks. He spent several minutes trying to get a good look at the animal, which strove always to keep well back in the press. Then he uttered an exclamation.

"Jim, take a look at that critter!" he burst out. "Danged if he don't look like the bronc Tex has been ridin'——"

Carver had his look. It did not take him long to recognize the horse. His face was sober as Hunch came up.

"What's wrong?" the latter demanded. They told him. He examined the short-coupled bay briefly and nodded to himself. "Uh-huh! Now mebby yuh feel like laughin' at what I said this mornin'——"

Candy whirled on him. "What yuh mean?" he snapped.

"Told yuh somethin's happened to Tex an' the kid, didn't I?" Wheeler countered.

Candy scoffed. "How do yuh know Tex didn't jest turn the bay loose? Mebby it was sore-footed or somethin'." Hunch shook his head positively.

"Turn a hoss loose when he knows we're foggin' the hills fer 'em? Unh-uh, that won't wash——"

"Then mebby the bay broke out of the pasture."

Hunch shrugged his shoulders expressively. "There ain't no arguin' with you," he grumbled. Carver had been following the exchange, however. He said:

"Now you're talking sense, Candy. The horse *could* have broken loose and thrown in with the wild ones. All the same, we won't forget this. As soon as we get back to the spread, one of us will ride up and see if the boys are back."

The task of hazing the wild horses down the hills was no light one; but finally they made it, with little more than the

loss of two or three head of scrub stuff. Reaching the J.C. shortly after dark, they threw the gather into the pens.

"Reckon you'll wait till mornin' to ride up to Skip's place?" Hunch queried. Carver said no.

"I'll go myself, boys, and I'll go now. I've been turnin' this over ever since we found the bay. It *does* look kind of queer. If I find them home, it can soon be explained; but I won't be satisfied till I find out, and you won't either."

There was a note of gravity in his voice, for he was remembering the envelope which Tex had given him to hold. Now, it occurred to him to wonder why. Finished speaking, he turned his horse and started away.

"Hold on," Candy exclaimed. "There ain't no sense in this; but if yo're bound to go, I'll go with yuh."

They pushed up the hills in silence. It was pitch dark, but after a time the young moon thrust over the horizon to aid them with its thin light.

Even before they reached the Padlock, they saw at once that no light was burning in the ranch house. Reining up in the yard, Carver got down and approached the door. It had been pulled shut. Shoving it open, he called: "Hello, Skip—Tex!"

There was no answer beyond the secretive scurrying of a pack rat.

"Things are the same here as when I come by the other day," Candy murmured. "They ain't been here at all, Jim."

Satisfied that he was right, Carver nevertheless struck a light and went through the place. There was little enough to see. H remarked: "Their bed-rolls are gone——"

Candy said plaintively: "Dang it, Jim, that only makes it look worse!"

Carver's steady grey eyes met his for a moment. He nodded forbodingly. The same thought had been in the minds of both for the past half-hour. Now it was out in the open.

"The boys are too shrewd to tangle with owlhoots, for any reason," he said as if arguing with himself. "Tex is, anyway——"

Candy said: "But if they couldn't help themselves?"

Carver appeared to come to an abrupt decision. "We'll knock off to-morrow," he declared, "and look into this—to satisfy our minds if nothing more. I don't really think anything has happened. Hunch's talk has just got us

stirred up. But if the boys should be stranded up in the hills, afoot. . . ."

They rode back to the J.C. occupied with their own thoughts. Hunch was waiting for them. Told the result of their investigation, he had plenty to say, shaking his head ominously. Moreover, he now gave his intuition free rein, until Candy flung at him crossly:

"Dammit, stow the chatter, will yuh? We're lookin' into this to-morrow. Let's have some peace in the meantime!"

Hunch withdrew into injured silence. However, he was as anxious as any to prosecute their search for their friends. He was first up the following morning, before the first streaks of light cracked open the eastern sky. Dawn was just beginning to lift the grey pall of shadows when the three flung saddles on their ponies and cinched up. No one had bothered to mention that the search might be a long one, yet they packed grub in their bed-rolls. A few minutes later they were on their way towards the looming shoulders of the Tetons.

It was a weary, fruitless morning they spent, climbing and ever climbing, as they combed the craggy ridges and spruce-grown flats of the country in which they had taken yesterday's catch of wild horses. Canyon after canyon had to be crossed, precipices were circumnavigated. Often as they separated, they came together again to compare notes, always with the same result.

Eating lunch in the early afternoon, Carver said: "Maybe we're being foolish about this, boys. We don't know that Skip and Tex weren't having a time in Medicine Dance, even while we were over at their place." His tone said that the broad light of day had thrown a different aspect on the whole affair. "They may never have come anywhere near this country."

"Then how do yuh account fer the shoe-tracks I been seein' all mornin', off an' on?" Hunch demanded bluntly.

They stared at him. "Yuh mean that?" Candy queried suspiciously.

"Shore I do!"

Carver said: "Well, that's something definite, at least. You better take us to the last place you saw them."

They were soon there. There was no mistaking the plain print of a horseshoe in the soil between two patches of rocky ground. Carver pointed out that it could have been left by some wandering owlhoot, but neither of the others

believed him. They were sure now that their friends were somewhere in this vast, wild scope of country. The search was taken up with renewed vigour, but even that enthusiasm was to wane before, late in the afternoon, Carver heard a gun-shot from over west.

He froze, alert for what might come next. The trio had separated for an hour before; it was Hunch who had gone over that way. Had he run into trouble himself, or—— Then the shot was repeated, and Carver knew it for a signal. He lost no time in turning towards it. After ten minutes, he spotted Candy, who waved and pointed. A moment later he saw Hunch. The latter stood in a little clearing, in the midst of rocks and brush. Carver and Candy reached him almost at the same time.

Wheeler said nothing to either of them, waving a hand about expressively, but there was no need for words. Carver took one look and slipped from the saddle, his face suddenly bleak and grey.

What was left of Tex Johnson and Skip Lang lay in awkward, tumbled positions where they had fallen. They had been shot—murdered. Their packs, apparently robbed, were scattered about; and there was the remains of a campfire. It was all plain reading to an experienced eye.

"Gawd!" Candy breathed awesomely. "Didn't have much of a chance, did they?" He indicated Skip's half-drawn gun.

"Tex shot twice," Hunch announced. "Greased lightnin', he was——" He covered him with a blanket as he spoke.

"He got somebody, too," Candy seconded. "Look at the dry blood over here on this rock." It was at a point some distance removed from where either of their friends had dropped.

"It means they were surprised—outnumbered," Carver declared. "Tex certainly squared with one of the murderers, if I'm any judge. The others packed him away with them." He pointed out other reasons why he thought so.

Rage roughened their voices at the cold-bloodedness of it. Plainly Tex and the kid had never been given a fair chance for their lives. It was incomprehensible.

"What'll we do with 'em?" Hunch queried, when they had talked it over for some minutes. "Bury 'em right here——?"

"Not till the sheriff has seen what there is to see," Jim vetoed. "One of us can hit for Medicine Dance right away. Another better pack shovels up from the ranch." He added: "I'll just stay here for a look around, I think, till you get back."

There was no demur to the arrangement. Hunch and Candy got away at once. Carver turned to his investigations, such as they were. He knew it would be evening before either could get back, and perhaps full dark. The one who went to town for the sheriff would not return before the following day.

After making sure nothing had been overlooked at the spot where the shooting had occurred, Carver swung into the saddle and made a half-mile circuit of the surrounding country. He found no tracks save his, Candy's and Hunch Wheeler's—and possibly Skip and Tex's. It was a wild, remote corner of the wilderness. Several times during his ride he flushed deer so tame that they stopped to stare at him. Partridge drummed in the brushy coverts, thundering away at his approach. The ragged needles of the Teton peaks jutted into the sky almost overhead. There was something ethereal and grand about them. Long after the light faded out of the heavens, the sunset glow, reflected from their snowy summits, threw a weird light over the little valley.

The air grew chilly. Breaking brush, Carver built a fire in a protected corner of the rocks, which also threw the heat outward. He made no pretence of preparing food. The finding of his friends had destroyed appetite for the time being. Most of all, he was conscious of a dull anger directed at the men who could rub others out so callously and efficiently, regardless of the reason. But why had it been done? Who could have been so desperately interested in putting the pair out of the way?

Carver did not have to hunt long or hard to find other questions equally unanswerable. There was the riddle of Skip and Tex's sudden riches, for instance. It had not seemed a riddle before. But in the light of subsequent events, it certainly began to look queer. There was likewise the matter of Tex's mysterious envelope. What could be in it? And was it, or the suddenly acquired Padlock ranch, in any way connected with what had occurred here?

"Be better able to answer that after I've opened the envelope," he mused. He entertained no scruples about doing it now. He wished that he had brought it with him.

He put in a restless evening until, towards ten o'clock, Candy rode up with the shovels. "Hell of a time gittin' back here," he grumbled, throwing the shovels on the ground with a clang. "Dunno what I come fer, neither. This place is dang spooky——"

At Carver's questions, he said everything was all right at the J. C. Hunch had hurried on to town. "I told 'im to bring the coroner along too, if he was in town. No use tryin' to pack the boys away from here." He shivered, casting suspicious looks about. "Git that coffee pot on the fire, Jim. As Hunch says, I got a feelin' I'm goin' to need it before mornin'!"

"I could do with some coffee myself," Carver nodded, beginning its preparation.

They got through the night somehow, alternately dozing and waking. The dawn was grey and freezing. It soon warmed up, however.

Hunch put in an appearance towards noon. Heck Lanning, the sheriff, was with him—a grizzled, sunbaked man not unlike Tex Johnson in appearance, but if Carver was any judge of men, without the latter's sharpness of wits. Lanning wore a drooping, grizzled moustache, and his bleached eyes were large and glassy.

Henry Morin, the coroner, had been unable to come; but Lanning said it wouldn't matter. In impressive silence, conscious of authority, he looked the situation over. A dozen curt questions presented themselves to his mind, and weighing the answers deliberately, he appeared arriving at his own conclusions.

"Lang an' Johnson have any enemies?" he demanded.

Candy grunted. Carver said reasonably: "I suppose about the same as any cow-pokes. Nothing serious."

"Yuh say Lang claimed he got the money to buy the Padlock place from a grandfather," the lawman pursued. "Shore of that?"

Jim shook his head. "I never saw any checks or letters, if that's what you mean—at least not to read them," he amended. He wished now that he had examined the letter Skip had been waving the day he and Tex had returned to the ranch from town with their news.

Lanning walked a little apart, rasping his pendulous jaw and shooting sharp looks at them. For a time he cogitated weightily. When he returned, it was to plant himself

squarely before them and rake their faces with his glassy eyes.

"We might's well come to the bottom of this now as later . . . suppose yuh tell me which one of yuh did it?"

CHAPTER VI

FOR a moment, a heavy, incredulous silence followed the sheriff's words. Candy reddened, his jaw dropping. Hunch was firing up too.

"What the hell, Lannin'!" he burst out. "If that's the kind of help yo're offerin' us——"

"Hold on," Jim cut him off smoothly. "The sheriff is within his rights in drawing his own conclusions in this case. He's got even less than us to go on. All the same, Lanning," he turned to the latter bluntly, "you're dead wrong if you think any of us had a hand in this."

He explained how they had gradually grown aware, while proceeding with their work, that something was wrong. The search had resulted which found its conclusion in the discovery of the bodies.

"We're as much in the dark about this as any one," Jim declared: "but you can expect active help from us whenever the need arises. We're all anxious to square this."

Pulling the blankets away from the dead men, Lanning had a final look at them. At length he got up.

"Okay, Carver," he nodded. "I'll take your word for the present anyway. If yuh say yuh hadn't any quarrel with these boys on account of their leavin' yuh, that's out. It's mighty plain that whoever did finish 'em thought they had plenty of reason."

"Yuh done with these boys?" Candy demanded crustily. He indicated Skip and Tex. The sheriff assented.

"Okay, then we'll bury 'em decent," the lanky one said. "Grab a shovel, Hunch——"

They set to work. It was a thankless task in that flinty soil, and they were glad when they finished. Their friends were laid in the graves, wrapped in their own blankets. It was a proceeding which had occurred many times in the range country, but it was not any pleasanter for that reason.

"Ought to say a few words, I expect," Hunch muttered as he and Candy leaned on their shovels.

"There's little we can say," Carver replied. "Skip and Tex were good boys. They deserved a better fate than this. All my prayin' is going into the promise to square this, if I'm ever able to."

After a few moments, the punchers began to fill in the holes. They worked silently, with compressed lips. Clearly their sentiments paralleled their leader's.

Heck Lanning watched till they were done. He turned away then.

"Like as not they run into some owlhoots," he observed to Carver. "There's plenty of 'em in this country. Yuh don't know any reason why they should tangle with yore friends?"

After brief reflection, Jim shook his head. He decided to say nothing of the envelope which Tex had given him, at least until he had had an opportunity to examine it.

"As I said before, it's all a mystery to me, Lanning."

"Of course, they might'a been gittin' too close to some hide-out up here," the latter mused. "But I dunno's that'll hold water either. . . . I'll stay up here a day or two," he proceeded, "an' take a look around. If I find anything, I'll let yuh know."

"You do that," Carver told him. "We stand ready to give you a hand."

"I may need it," the other nodded.

"Meanwhile, we'll undertake to look after the Padlock till it's decided what's to be done."

"Did either Lang or Johnson have any folks?" the sheriff inquired.

"Not that I know of. Tex, anyway. If Skip did, he never mentioned them."

Carver and the others pulled away a few minutes later, packing their friends' belongings with them. Silence accompanied them for several miles, until finally Candy burst out:

"Hell, Lannin' won't learn anything! If somethin' is goin' to be done about this Jim, we'll have to do it ourselves."

Carver came out of his abstraction. "Afraid you're right, Candy," he admitted. "But notifying him was the only thing we could do. We'll wait a day or two and see what happens."

They reached the J. C. in late afternoon. While nobody put it into words, all understood that for the time being their horse hunting was at an end. The work of breaking their catch was still before them, however. With that in mind, Candy and Hunch went out to the corrals, while Carver stepped in the ranch house.

He had slipped Tex's envelope into a crevice in the logs, in the back wall of his bunk. He fished it out now. With it in his hands, he stood there turning it over and staring at it for a long time. Did it contain the answer to the mystery facing them?

Suddenly his long fingers ripped the envelope wide open. A folded paper dropped out. Bending to pick it up, Carver saw that it was old and dirty, much fingered and worn at the creases. He straightened it out. For a moment there was silence as he strove to make it out; then he moved to the light. He saw at once that it was a map, but of what he was at a loss to determine.

Turning it over and over, he scratched his head in perplexity. "This don't help much," he muttered his disappointment. A thought came to him, and he returned to the envelope. Apparently it had contained nothing else. He felt curiously let down, and at the same time more baffled than ever.

But as his restless mind took hold of the problem, new thoughts crowded in upon him. The very mysteriousness of the map was in itself suggestive. Was it the plan of a secret mine? Jim decided against this almost at once, since there could be no reason why a mine should not be recorded and worked openly. Moreover, there was little or no mining done in this country. . . . A cache, then? Owlhoot gold flashed into his mind. The boys might well have gotten wind of something of the kind. It would explain a lot, moreover—such as their sudden possession of money. Had they been involved with the outlaws in some manner?

He shook his head decidedly.

"If they were, it was accidentally," he told himself. "Neither was that kind. . . . But if they'd stumbled over some cache of stolen money, and it was found out, I suppose that would be reason in plenty for outlaws to rub them out."

While his thoughts continued to circle around the problem, he could get no further with it. He did not neglect to

study the map carefully, however. "Horse-headed rock—tree—forty paces—three feet"—it was all plain reading. Certainly it spelled the key to something valuable, buried somewhere. Perhaps—he straightened with a grunt at the thought—Skip and Tex had been killed while hunting for it! But after a time he pursed his lips in doubt.

"I'm biting off large chunks of guesswork now," he told himself. "Better let this cook a while."

Tucking the map back in its envelope, he returned it to its place and joined the others at the corrals.

There followed two days of hard work, cutting out the culls and breaking the remainder of the horses. Dust arose in golden clouds about the J. C. pens, and the shouts of men and infuriated whistling of wild stallions broke the stillness. Except for a roan stallion which Carver picked out for his own, they were not over-gentle with these horses. It would not have paid; and besides, it was wholly unnecessary for the use to which they were to be put.

On the second afternoon, Heck Lanning stopped at the ranch on his way down from the high country. He shook his head at their inquiring looks.

"Not a thing to go on up there," he said. "I didn't even run acrost any sign. As fer an owlhoot hide-out—wal, if there was one there, it still is, because I never spotted it!"

Candy stared at him in disgust.

"So yo're givin' up, Lannin'?" he demanded. "Or are yuh headin' fer town to gather a posse an' give that country a good goin' over?"

Lanning showed irritation. "I may do that, if it works out," he returned. "If not, what's the odds? Like as not, whoever did fer them boys has made tracks an' lots of 'em by this time——"

"Thought you'd say that," Candy grumbled under his breath. "Mebby it *don't* make no diff, at that!"

"I'm ridin' over to the Padlock now fer a look around," Lanning continued. "May take me a while. If yuh don't object, I may spend the night here."

"Glad to have you," Jim assured him perfunctorily.

"What's he think he'll find over there?" Hunch growled sarcastically, when the lawman had ridden away. "If we ain't spotted anything, I won't give him much of a show——"

"Let him have his look," Carver returned philosophically. "There's just a chance he may stumble over something that we've overlooked."

The sheriff did. When he reappeared at dusk, they saw at once by his face that he was the bearer of news.

"Thought Lang had a few hundred head of white-faces on his range," he began at once. Carver nodded.

"He has. We've been trying to keep an eye on them, but we haven't had much time——"

Lanning said: "Wal, yuh don't need to worry no more."

"Huh?" Candy was surprised. "What yuh mean, Lannin'?"

"I mean that every hoof an' horn of that stuff has been drove off!"

Carver got up from his seat on the steps. "Gone?" he exclaimed. "You mean—rustled?"

"I reckon."

They could scarcely believe it. For ten minutes they talked it over, trying to find the answer. "Plenty of rustlers in this country, far's that goes," Hunch observed.

"Whoever it was this time," Jim pointed out, "it looks as if they knew about Skip and Tex being gone. *We* haven't spread the news—and Lanning hasn't had time to."

In the end they gave it up.

"There's sign, yes," Lanning assented in answer to questions. "Hours old, by this time—mebby a full day. It disappears in the rough country, north. If there'd been a chance in the world of overtakin' the stuff, yuh wouldn't be seein' me here now."

It was his conclusion that outlaws had been responsible for the whole business. Perhaps, he argued, they had even killed Tex and Skip Lang so that they could drive off the steers. If Carver disagreed with him, he didn't find it worth his while to say as much. It was true that he might be withholding valuable information in neglecting to tell the sheriff of the map; but knowing Lanning as he did, he felt certain the other would be unable to make head or tail of it, and would dismiss it as foolishness in any event.

Lanning left for Medicine Dance early the next morning. The work of getting the horses in shape went on. At last it was done. One night Carver said:

"To-morrow we'll drive the culls to Victor and shove

'em aboard the cars for Denver. Ought to learn something about the army buyers at the same time."

The drive north to the shipping-point was made without great difficulty. The culls, runty stuff with alkalied hoofs for the most part, would be sold for a song and it didn't matter if a few escaped on the way. They had them aboard the stock cars by noon of the following day. Before leaving town, Carver arranged to his own satisfaction for a buyer to visit the J.C. within a few days. As he had predicted, Europe was demanding horses; the market had suddenly shot up until a man could realise a handsome profit from them.

Home once more, while waiting for the arrival of the buyer Carver turned his attention to the problem of his friends' death. He and Candy made a trip into the hills one day, without learning anything. On the following day, he and Hunch went again.

They were rewarded in the afternoon by locating horse sign high above a craggy canyon wall, and later, the slowly bleaching skeleton of a man who had been tumbled over the edge. Coming across it quite by accident, Carver spent much time in trying to read what had happened. He could learn little about the man himself. The coyotes had already been here, and what they had left was not much. Just a few rags and shreds of clothing, which told nothing. Even the boots had been gnawed off and carried away.

"It's a safe bet that whoever he was, he was an owl-hoot," Jim hazarded. "Other men seldom disappear this way without your hearing something about it."

"Yuh reckon he had a scrap with his pals?" Hunch asked.

Carver didn't know. "It might be," he admitted. But even as he spoke, he wondered.

He had fully decided by this time that the map Tex had given him marked a secret cache, and that the pair had been hunting for it. What else would have carried them so high into the lonely Tetons? And—that being the case—if outlaws had finished them, had it been their first brush, or had there been others? Carver hauled up suddenly at the direction of his own thoughts.

"I'm trying to tell myself now that Skip and Tex may have accounted for this gent," he mused. "There's no grounds for such a supposition, none whatever. And yet . . ."

"Dang it, Jim," Hunch broke in on his reflections. "It's a cinch somethin' fishy's goin' on here! Yuh don't stumble on to dead men all over the place without a good reason."

"We're fully agreed on that," Carver returned dryly. "All we want now is an explanation——"

Hunch subsided. "I dunno," he grumbled. "But somethin' tells me this is a deep business. We're takin' a long hard trail before we come to the end of it—if we ever come to it at all."

"You mean you think we might better drop it?" Jim asked curiously, to see what he would say.

Hunch was unable to find his answer easily. "If we think anything of our hides, yes," he acknowledged grudgingly. "How do we know how soon we'll all git the same dose?"

"We don't know. It's up to us to see that we don't, that's all." But Carver felt an unusual depression following the other's words. Too many times had Hunch won his right to his nickname by the accuracy of his predictions. . . . He shrugged himself clear of these thoughts a moment later.

"Nothing else to be seen here," he observed. "Better head back for the spread before dark."

Candy met them in the yard. "Wal—?" he demanded, eyeing them shrewdly. Their faces had told him that they had been more fortunate than he and Jim on the previous day, if fortune meant that they had come upon some new discovery.

Jim told him briefly of what they had found. Candy was astonished.

"Another one?" he exclaimed. "Yuh didn't make out who it was——?"

Carver said no. He repeated his guess that it might have been an outlaw whose luck had run out. They discussed it pro and con without getting anywhere.

"Yuh lettin' Heck Lannin' in on this?" Candy inquired.

"Certainly. But not to-night. That gent has been laying where we found him so long that another day won't matter in the slightest. . . . I'll ride to town in the morning," Jim added.

As it turned out, however, the trip was unnecessary. Breakfast was scarcely over the next morning before Hunch, standing in the yard, called Carver out.

"Somebody comin'," he announced, waving towards the

trail. "Looks like Lannin' himself. He's got some folks with him. Dunno who they are."

Carver had his look. What Hunch said was true. The sheriff was approaching; and with him rode a girl, and a man whom Jim had never seen before. He stood at gaze without saying a word, waiting for them to come up.

CHAPTER VII

"CARVER," were Sheriff Lanning's opening words, "I want yuh to meet Miss Audrey Harkness."

Taking his hat off and giving the girl a direct, smiling look, Jim felt that he had already met her. She looked like a person easy to know. Small, slim and erect, she had a healthy colouring. She held her head as though she were proud of herself. Watching her steadily from the moment his eyes fell on her, he told himself he had learned quite a few things about her at once. For some reason, they seemed important to him.

"How do you do, ma'am?" he said. "Get down."

He stepped forward to help her out of the saddle, but with a lithe free movement she slipped down before he could reach her side. Understanding his intention, however, she gave him a friendly smile out of candid brown eyes.

"An' this," Lanning went on, turning to the man, "is Mr. Jared Strange."

"Glad to know you, Strange," Carver nodded.

The other, he saw now, did not belong to the range country, despite his riding boots and Stetson. Middle-aged and stocky, he gave the impression of a business man on holiday. There the similarity between him and Audrey Harkness ended. Jim found himself wondering what they meant to each other.

"Miss Harkness is from New York," the sheriff supplied. "She jest got out here to-day. . . . Strange is from the East too."

There was a formality about all this which told Carver it was expected to mean something to him.

"Staying a while, I trust?" he smiled at the girl. She had chestnut hair, neatly kept. It seemed to him that he had never met a girl just like her before. But now, for the first time, he noted a shadow in her eyes.

She said quietly: "I'm afraid I must——"

"Miss Harkness come out West to look for her father," Lanning explained. "He's disappeared."

For no reason that he could determine, Carver suddenly thought of the man whose bones they had discovered bleaching in the canyon. For a moment, his blood chilled. Then he relaxed, remembering the shreds and pieces of clothing he and Hunch had found. They could have belonged only to the apparel of a range man.

"That so?" he covered his thoughts, his face sobering. "How did it happen?"

"Strange had a part in it," Heck answered. "He's been out here a couple months. Let him tell yuh the story."

Carver turned to the Easterner. He thought he understood now what had brought him and Audrey Harkness together. Oddly enough, he felt relief, for with his first glance he had decided he liked the man little. Strange's eyes were small, dark, almost beady. In a less impressive face there would have appeared something shifty about them. They were steady enough now, boring into Carver as if they would read the secret of his quality.

"Harkness and I were taking a hunting-trip, Carver. It's a long story. We got up into the high country, and Harkness got himself lost——"

"You mean you were alone—just the two of you?" Jim asked.

Strange assented heavily. "It's been my habit for several years to spend a month or two out here," he continued. "Usually I put up at my brother-in-law's place on the South Fork of the Snake. I like to hunt, and there' no better hunting country in the Rockies. I know the Tetons pretty well; I never had any trouble finding my own way about. Harkness is a somewhat older man than myself; we got acquainted in a Park Avenue club, and he used to listen to my tales. This spring, when we felt we knew each other fairly well, he proposed that he come along with me for this year's hunt. Naturally, I was delighted. The man claimed quite a considerable experience at that sort of thing. It never occurred to me that he might not be able to take care of himself——"

He hauled up short, as if suddenly conscious that Harkness's daughter was listening.

"I had come out ahead of Harkness to make certain arrangements and visit with my people. I drove east by buckboard to meet him at Fort Washakie. We outfitted there. Pack horses, and all that sort of thing. Then we headed west. Crossed the Wind River Range and made for the Tetons. It was a long trip, and we travelled slowly to give Harkness a chance to harden up. . . ."

As he talked on smoothly, Carver found himself lending a decidedly critical ear. Strange told so straightforward a story, with such an air of assurance, that it had all the earmarks of a set speech, carefully prepared beforehand. To do the man justice, it might well be because he had had to relate his experience, not once, but a dozen times.

He and Harkness had reached the Teton country at last. They had put in several exciting days whipping the brawling trout streams threading the southern and eastern slopes; there had followed a long hard day of stalking an elk. On the following day—they had thrown up their base camp by this time—they decided to laze around and rest up.

In the morning, Harkness had done a bit of fishing, to keep his hand in, as he said. During the afternoon he had started out with a small rifle to practise on the whistling marmots. It was high up there; so high that timberline lay only a mile or so distant along the jutting heights—and it was there, on the tundra-like barrens cluttered with rock, that the marmots sported.

Strange had thought nothing of Harkness's design at the time. Surely a man could take a walk up there for an hour or so without losing track of camp! Himself, he had spent the afternoon at camp chores, paying little attention, until suddenly he realized that it was getting late and Harkness had not returned.

"It still didn't occur to me that anything was wrong," he declared. "Harkness had shown himself fairly capable. I figured he was enjoying himself so much he hadn't noticed the time. I got out my belt gun—it's a forty-five Colt—and fired several shots in the air. It seemed likely enough that he would hear, and understand my meaning."

But an hour had passed without Harkness putting in an appearance. Strange began to get worried then. It swept over him—he was very graphic on this point—that he was responsible for Harkness, in a sense. He couldn't allow anything to happen to him. Almost without thought, and certainly

without anything but the clothes he stood in, he started out in the gathering dusk to hunt for him.

"It was foolish, I know," he admitted in a regretful tone. "I might at least have stuffed something to eat in my pocket—and remembered to take along my compass. But I knew, or thought I knew, that Harkness had had no intention of going far. Maybe he'd had an accident; got caught in the rocks, or fell and stunned himself, a mile or so from camp. Somehow I was certain I'd find him in a short time.

Most of the night had been consumed in that search. Dark as it was, it had passed almost unnoticed in the frantic fear that Harkness might die of exposure before he was found. And yet, Strange had not found him. By morning, to his consternation, he discovered that he was himself lost. It hadn't bothered him greatly at the time, except that he could no longer be certain of just where to hunt. Lacking the compass, he had no sure means of orienting himself. Up there in that high country, it was possible to get completely turned around and to stay turned around. That was what had happened to him. There was a rueful note, either completely sincere or a masterly bit of acting, as he told this part of his story.

It hadn't been long before it became a matter of life and death for him. Once he had knocked over a rock cony, only to find that he had no matches for a fire; he'd eaten a bit of the raw flesh, thrown the rest away. The time came when he would have sold his soul for the discarded fragments. He had even lost track of time, by then.

"I'd swear it was a month," he confessed, "but by the calendar, it was ten days later that I was picked up by a ranger in a starving condition. He got me to a ranch some miles down the mountains, and I was put to bed."

Carver listened to this narrative with growing astonishment. "And so Harkness hasn't been heard of since?" he demanded.

Strange shook his head. A guarded look sprang into his eyes, unless Jim was greatly deceived; but his tone was steady enough. "That ranger waited till I was in a condition to talk. I told my story as well as I was able. . . . I was in bed nearly a week, and during that time something like twenty or thirty rangers and cowboys combed the high country for some sign of him. They found our camp, just as we'd left it, except that the animals had got into our food and packed

small articles away. But Harkness——" His voice died. It wasn't necessary for him to go on.

"I've taken a hand in the business myself," the sheriff spoke up, with unconscious show of importance. "I reckon it's only natcheral I didn't git any further than all them cow-pokes an' rangers. Anyway, Harkness is still missin'."

Carver no longer had to ask himself the reason for the faint shadow in Audrey Harkness's eyes.

"Then you think Harkness met with an accident—that he's——?" He did not add the word "dead," but they understood. Heck rubbed his jaw sagely, weighing his answer.

"Wal, I couldn't jest say as to that——"

"The chances are," Jared Strange broke in reluctantly, "that he's out of his torment by this time."

"I do not agree with Mr. Strange," Audrey declared quietly. "I feel sure that Father is not only still alive, but is in trouble."

"Why do you think so, Miss Harkness?" Carver asked.

"Because certain things have happened that convince me," she told him.

She explained that she had received letters signed by her father on dates later than that on which he had become separated from Strange. None of them so much as mentioned the adventure. The only queer thing about them was that each requested her to transfer large sums of money to him from his New York bank. Since there had seemed nothing unusual in the instructions at the time, the letters explaining that he was interested in several Western ventures and desirous of investing, she had complied with his demands.

Carver stared at her, perplexed.

"Then you don't think your father got out of his jam, wrote these letters to you in New York, and is now safe and concerned with his own affairs somewhere in this country?" he asked. Even as he spoke he had his answer. No man could have been so callous of the anxiety of a friend—unless Jared Strange had gvien Harkness reason to be glad of seeing the last of him. Without waiting for a reply, he pursued:

"Would you mind saying how much money you sent your father altogether?"

"It was close to thirty-five thousand dollars," Audrey told him readily. "Very nearly all he had——"

"And where did you send it?"

"To Green River," was the answer.

On Carver's glancing at Lanning, the latter nodded. "I been down there," he said. "Couldn't learn nothin'. The money was turned over to a gent who, from the description, might have been Miss Harkness's dad himself——"

"But he didn't get it, all the same." Audrey was suddenly fierce. "I'm sure of it!"

"It does look," Carver admitted, "as though something shady were going on. Harkness may have been held for ransom——"

"Who'd be doin' that?" Lanning demanded brusquely.

"Why, offhand I couldn't say. . . . It might be Reb Battle's old gang."

"Not a chance," Heck scoffed. "They was drove out of this country two months ago, at the time Battle was killed."

"It might not be Battle's crowd," Jim conceded. "If not, Lanning, who was it that jumped Lang and Johnson?"

The sheriff found himself unable to answer. But plainly he did not agree. Carver found it odd that he should entertain such firm convictions concerning a matter of which he admittedly knew so little. A moment later, catching the glint of wary attention in Jared Strange's eyes, he wondered if he had the explanation.

Still he had no clear idea as to just why Lanning had brought this pair to him, and why he had been told the whole thing in detail. Heck appeared to read his thought. He said:

"Miss Harkness knew somethin' was wrong the minute she read in the paper that her dad had disappeared. She come West right away, an' asked fer my help. I'm doin' what I can. But she's decided what she wants is to hire some gent who'll devote all his time to the business——"

"I want someone who can find my father, Mr. Carver," the girl struck in. "I am firmly convinced he is alive—that he is being held somewhere in these mountains. I would be willing to pay almost anything!"

"I told her," Lanning amplified, "that you was the man fer her, Carver. Yuh know this country 'bout as well as any man. An' yuh know how to go about these things."

"Of course, it's all foolishness to an extent," Strange thrust in suavely; "and I've advised Miss Harkness to that effect. But she insist she wants the search made."

He sounded as if he were throwing cold water on the

whole thing, and for the first time Carver detected a note of antagonism in his voice, so faint that he could not be sure he had caught it at all.

"I see."

Jim turned the proposal over in his mind. It was far from anything he had expected; in fact, it lay wholly beyond the scope of his previous experience. Whatever he had done in the past, the work of a range detective had not been included in it.

"Can you see your way to do this for me, Mr. Carver?" the girl asked bravely.

Something in her inflection would have bidden him to acquiesce, had nothing else inclined him that way. He told himself that he would do even more for her—and for that matter, without her asking it. But beyond this, there was his own interest in the matter. For no particular reason, and ye logically enough, in his mind the mysterious killing of Tex Johnson and Skip Lang; the business of the map, and the peculiar circumstances of John Harkness's disappearance, all worked into a single pattern. That they were all parts of a single design he would not have sworn; but that they all pointed in one direction any one could tell at a glance.

These thoughts passed through his mind swiftly. Almost without pausing, he nodded.

"I've got a sizable bunch of horses here in the corrals, ma'am," he said. "There's a buyer coming to look at them to-day or to-morrow. If you're willing to wait till that's out of the way, then I'm your man."

Hope, gratitude, and confidence sprang into her face as she heard him out. She stepped forward impulsively, putting a small, firm brown hand in his in token that the bargain was made.

"That will be quite satisfactory," she assured him. "I don't know how to thank you for accepting." But her eyes seemed to know; and strangely enough, Carver found what they had to say entirely adequate to the occasion.

CHAPTER VIII

Miss Harkness was staying in Medicine Dance. She had a room at the hotel. She wanted, however, to be where she could do everything possible to aid in the search.

"You can stay here, if you want," Carver told her. "We can make you comfortable. I'll send one of the boys in for you with a rig."

"I think you're making a mistake—if you'll pardon me, Miss Harkness," Strange declared candidly. "This is no country for a woman. My own view," he added, "would be to let Sheriff Lanning handle the matter entirely. He's the duly constituted authority in such cases."

"I don't aim to let this matter drop," Heck put in, "no matter what Miss Harkness does about it. Too much has been goin' on here fer me to pass over."

He looked determined; but Jim could no longer doubt that his first suspicion was right, and that Strange exerted considerable influence over the lawman's actions. He saw, however, that what had been said had little effect on the girl.

"It's very kind of you, Mr. Carver," she told him. "I will accept."

Jim nodded his satisfaction, and they completed their arrangements on the spot. Audrey left with Lanning and Strange a few minutes later.

Hunch had been an interested follower of all this: as had Candy, listening from the door.

"Kind of a strange job fer yuh to tackle, ain't it—huntin' fer a 'lost' man in these hills?" the former queried, when they were alone. He watched Jim, drawing his own conclusions as to what had prompted him to accept.

Carver had not thought of the matter in that light, but it was true. "It'll serve to keep us busy," he evaded.

"Then yuh think, like she does, that her dad is alive?" Hunch persisted.

Jim said slowly: "I don't know why I should, but I do." He looked up. "Has it occurred to you that there may be some connection between Harkness's disappearance and what happened to Skip and Tex?"

"Shore," Hunch admitted gruffly. "I got that right off. But remember what I said before," he added significantly.

"You mean that we may be asking for trouble?"

"Reckon I do."

Jim turned it over for a moment before replying. "This is the first time I ever knew you to turn your back on trouble," he said finally.

"I ain't," Hunch told him flatly. "Don't make any mistake about that. I'm ready to go the whole way with yuh."

"Same here," Candy seconded. "We ain't passin' this up jest because it looks risky, Jim."

Carver was satisfied. It was on the tip of his tongue to tell them about the map, but for some reason he decided against it. To him the map was simply a part of the whole baffling puzzle; he did not propose to allow them to be shunted away from the original object of their investigations by a too enthusiastic interest in the whereabouts of the cache.

That afternoon the horse buyer from Victor put in an appearance. He evinced gratification at sight of the stock in the corrals. "Didn't know there was as good a grade of hosses to be found in the hills," he confessed. "I'll take all of this kind of stuff off your hands that you can round up."

He was less inclined than the common run of his kind to haggle over the price—proof in full that not only were the horses in great demand, but that he did not want to run the chance of some other buyer outbidding him. A bargain was accordingly struck out of hand.

"You'll deliver, of course?"

Carver expressed his readiness to do it. The buyer nodded.

"I'll have the cars ready when yuh reach town," he promised. "You can pick up your money at the same time."

He rode away presently, like a man well satisfied with a good stroke of business. Candy looked after him dubiously.

"I dunno," he muttered.

"What don't yuh?" Hunch countered.

Candy turned to Carver. "From the way he acted, Jim, yuh could'a squeezed twice the price outa him," he averred. Hunch snorted with exaggerated disgust.

"An' yo're the hombre who didn't figger there was any money at all in wild hoss huntin'!" he exclaimed. "Why we had to pry yuh away from that blame emporium of yores over at Bridger's Ford! Yo're gettin' bigger money fer two months' work than you'll see again fer a while! Jim did okay——"

"I ain't kickin' about that," Candy hastened to disclaim. "The price was high enough, an' we'll git along on it fer quite a spell. Only that gent gimme the feelin' he was fleecin' us."

"Trouble with you," Hunch grinned, "yo're jest natcherly distrustful."

Early the next morning, they got started with the horses. To keep them from growing restless, a round pace was maintained. Victor was reached in short order.

The buyer was as good as his word. The stock cars were waiting. Jim and the others shoved the horses aboard, sighing their relief as the last one disappeared. While stock handling was their self-chosen work, there was no denying that it made heavy demands on a man. Carver had made no pretence of giving his full attention to anything else till the wild ones were out of his way.

It was too late to get into the bank to-day. Jim said he would stay in town until morning, but that Hunch or Candy could push back to the ranch, hitch up the rig, and drive to Medicine Dance for Audrey Harkness.

There was no argument about who should go. Hunch was plainly more than eager; while Candy, who was under no illusions as to his own handsomeness, expressed his intention of remaining with Jim. "Don't put too much lard on yore hair," he counselled his brother puncher satirically. "Jim'll never fergive yuh if yuh go stealin' his gurl——"

Strangely enough, Carver found nothing humourous in the gibe. "What do you mean—my girl?" he grunted. Candy grinned at him, unabashed.

"Pardon me fer mentionin' it," he said, "before yuh got around to admittin' it yourself. . . . Not but what you've already done that, by yore actions."

Jim disposed of the subject curtly. Nevertheless, he found his own shortness puzzling. At another time, he conceded that he might have been powerfully attracted by Audrey Harkness; but he knew the weight of care resting on the girl's mind at present. It was no time to trouble her with foolishness of any sort.

He saw Hunch off, and he and Candy put in a lazy evening. Victor was a small place, affording few amusements. There were a couple of saloons, with a card game in one of them—no more. Jim saw what there was to see and retired to the weather-beaten hotel. Coming in at a late hour Candy found him seated on the edge of his bed, a frown creasing his brow.

"Still thinkin' about 'er?" the lanky one twitted facetiously.

Carver tossed him a disgusted look. "I'm trying to piece what we already know into some kind of an answer," he responded; "and I'm not having much luck."

"Wal, yuh kin give all your time to it, beginnin' right now," Candy said philosophically. From his tone it was evident that he faced the riddle with considerably less enthusiasm than Jim. The latter gazed at him.

"Not going cold on this, are you?"

"Uh-uh," Candy denied. "I jest don't like the feelin' that we're worryin' more about some stranger than about what happened to Skip and Tex."

"Don't worry," Carver told him grimly. "I haven't overlooked them and I don't intend to. Whatever comes out of this business, I'll square their killing if I don't do anything else!"

They spent a restless night, and were about early. The horse buyer met them at the bank at nine. Their business there was soon completed. Putting his money in his pocket, Jim shook hands with the man and turned away. Candy had their broncs waiting. They were soon on the way home.

Hunch had not yet returned when they arrived.

The ranch wagon was gone. "He'll be along any time, now," Carver remarked.

"Danged if I like the idee of a woman around the place," Candy grumbled.

"Why?"

"Wal—fer a dozen reasons. We can't say what comes into our heads without knockin' off the rough edges fust, an' we can't live like we want to——"

"Don't worry," Jim advised him. "What we'll be doing don't include hangin' around the ranch. You'll be lucky if you see much of her at all."

Candy gave him a slow look, as if wondering whether that went for him as well.

It had been early afternoon when they arrived. An hour later Hunch drove up in the wagon, grinning broadly. Audrey Harkness was with him on the wagon seat. Two expensive looking suitcases were in the back.

"Glad you didn't change your mind, ma'am," Jim told her, helping her down. Only by accident did he succeed in lifting her bags out before Hunch got to them. He led her inside.

In the kitchen the girl looked around as if wondering what to expect. To her surprise, the place was quite clean and neat. Carver did not bother to explain that he had put in most of his time before her arrival in straightening up.

"You can have the front room all to yourself," he said, showing her into it. Still she continued to glance about. He thought he read the direction of her thoughts. "There's no woman to stay with you ma'am. I figured to send one of the boys for Mrs. Conroe—wife of a rancher half a dozen miles south. She'll be glad to come over."

Audrey hesitated. "And are you and the—the boys to remain here?" she asked finally.

"No," he said. "Probably we'll strike into the hills in short order. It's up there that we'll have to learn anything we can," he reminded.

"Then you needn't bother about Mrs. Conroe," she returned quietly. "I am quite capable of taking care of myself. I won't in the least mind staying alone. In fact, I should prefer it——"

He nodded comprehension and full approval. While it was no more than the average Western girl would have said, it was no less unexpected, coming from her.

"Just as you wish, ma'am." He paused in the door. "You'll be comfortable here. There's practically anything you could want, somewheres around." He wanted to ask whether she had a gun in her effects, but wary of arousing her apprehensions unnecessarily, decided to leave one where she could easily find it.

"I'm sure I will make out very well," she smiled.

Retiring to the yard, he began to throw a small pack together on the kitchen steps. Candy observed it.

"What's the idee?" he demanded. "We pullin' out right now?" Carver nodded.

"Get up the horses," he directed. "We ought to put a few miles behind us before dark."

"Where we headin'?" queried Hunch, who had been listening.

"I thought we'd try and locate that camp that Strange was telling about. It can't be more than hirty or forty miles from here."

The two said no more. It had always been their way to follow where Carver led, and it was so now. Their pre-

parations were soon completed. Jim asked himself how long they would have to wait before the girl put in an appearance, when he saw her at the door. He went to her at once.

"We'll be leaving now, ma'am, if you're sure you'll be all right."

She appeared surprised at his haste. "But we've said nothing about payment yet——"

He shook his head with a smile. "And we won't. If you don't mind, Miss Harkness, I'd rather do this without pay. We've got plenty of money, and——"

"But I can't hear of that," she protested warmly. "Why should you, a stranger, interest yourself in my troubles out of mere kindness?"

"It's nothing of the kind, ma'am," he assured her. "There's more to this than meets the eye. Take my word for it——"

"I'm afraid I can't," she insisted.

Reluctantly, he told her of Skip and Tex, and the strange fate that had been theirs. Had she never appeared in the country, he declared, he would still be making the attempt to square their murder. If he had been asking himself questions concerning her quickness of wit, he had his answer in the promptness with which she caught his meaning.

"Then you think there *is* a connection between Father's disappearance and—the death of your friends?" she faltered.

"I'm positive of it," he answered simply. "I'm going now to where your father was last seen. . . . By the way, you're certain the signatures on those cheques were genuine?"

"There could be no mistaking them."

Seeing her eyes brighten at this reminder that her father was still living, he nodded. "I wouldn't go far away from the ranch, ma'am. And don't worry about anything. I'm confident that sooner or later we'll find Harkness." As if at an afterthought, he added: "I suppose Strange took the stage for the East, after you reached the town the other day?"

"Why, no," she said. "He is remaining for the time being. If he felt any responsibility for Father before," she pointed out, "there is no reason why he should not continue to do so now."

"That's true," he acknowledged hastily. "Probably he'll do everything he can to help Heck Lanning." But to himself, he thought they were both protesting too much.

"I suppose you knew Strange before this happened?" he continued casually. She shook her head. Even now he could not forget how distractingly pretty she looked.

"I never laid eyes on him in my life." She paused. "You sound as though you scarcely approved of Jared Strange, Mr. Carver." She waited for his answer.

He was in no haste to give it. "I don't know as I approve or disapprove," he said finally. "But if he sticks around, the one thing he can be sure of is that I won't overlook him!"

"Isn't it odd," she exclaimed. "For some reason, I am inclined to feel that way about him myself."

After a few more words he turned away, hat in hand. "You can expect us back the day after to-morrow, along toward evening—or sooner if we learn anything," he said over his shoulder.

A moment later he swung into the saddle. Neither Candy nor Hunch had anything to offer as they rode away; but neither missed the frequency with which he turned to look back.

"We'll go on by ourselves if yuh jest can't tear yoreself away," Candy burst out finally, a little tartly. For once, Carver failed to respond with sharpness.

"I've been wondering whether we ought to leave her there, all by herself," he said soberly; "or if one of you should stay behind and keep a watch."

"If yuh see it that way," Candy retorted with heat, "why didn't yuh tell 'er to stay in town in the fust place?"

Carver was fairly caught, and he admitted as much to himself. "I know what she's going through," he defended his course without rancour; "if it makes her feel that she's closer to things, or helping in any manner, she's perfectly welcome to the ranch."

"Shore," Hunch thrust in conciliatingly. "The pore gurl's bearin' up mighty well, if yuh ask me. She'll take care of 'erself, all right. Yuh kin forget about it, Jim."

Carver said no more on the subject; but as they dropped over a high pine ridge and the J.C. ranch house was lost to sight, he found some difficulty in convincing himself that he wanted to forget.

CHAPTER IX

THE first opportunity they had had to look over the Midnight range, where the Padlock beef had been grazing, was too good to miss. Carver said they would go there directly.

"The rustlers' sign will be cold," he admitted. "But it hasn't stormed. We ought to be able to tell just what did happen."

"Reckon I ain't got much faith in Lannin's say-so, myself," Candy grunted.

They were soon at the Padlock. The place had a forlorn look. The door was swinging. They dismounted for a look around. Inside, things were tumbled about; but as Jim pointed out, that might have been done by the sheriff in his search for clues. They found nothing to interest them, unless it was the old pipe which Candy picked up. It had belonged to Tex. Polishing it on his levis, Candy shoved it in his pocket.

The Midnight range was considerably broken up. It was composed of a series of pockets and small meadows scattered through the ridges and rocky dykes. For some time they failed to see any tracks at all, until finally, breaking through a pine fringe, Carver said:

"Here's where the stuff was gathered."

The ground was stamped with a bewildering maze of tracks, as if a large number of steers had milled there. A moment later, following the little basin's border, Hunch sang out: "They went this way!"

A broad track led away to the north. They followed for half a mile. The sign disappeared occasionally on rocky going, but usually reappeared a distance farther on. Finally it petered out altogether at the edge of a broad field of tufa.

"This is where Lanning lost it," Jim commented.

They pushed on, seeking its continuation. From time to time Carver cast a glance into the west. The sun was fast sinking. The crests of the rocky ridges and buttes were already reddening with sunset glow.

Two miles beyond the point at which it had last been seen, the trail was picked up by Candy. Hearing his hail, the others got there in a hurry. Now the sign appeared occasionally for another mile. "Hittin' north, all right," Hunch growled. The fact did not augur well. Except for

the Victor range, bearing somewhat west, a hundred miles of almost trackless wilderness lay that way.

Light was beginning to fade when Carver discovered a point at which a dozen steers had been cut out of the Padlock herd. Their sign swung off at right angles, heading straight into the heart of the Teton maze. Candy scratched his head.

"What in hell's the meanin' of that?" he queried.

"There's just one answer," Jim replied finally. "The main bunch is being shoved on somewhere to market. This dozen or so head is to be beefed—if it hasn't been already."

They stared at him.

"Yuh mean there's men enough here in the mountains to make away with all them steers?" Hunch demanded. Both he and Candy had sobered considerably.

"I can't see anything else for it," was the answer.

"Then there is a gang up in here," Candy declared. "They're organized . . . . is that what yo're sayin'?"

"You've seen the same as I," Carver retorted, unmoved. "What do you make of it?"

They found nothing to say. A few minutes later, the sign of the steers faded once more on the rocks. Carver attempted briefly to pick it up, failed, and turned away.

"Getting too late to do anything more here," he remarked. "Maybe we know all we need to, anyway."

"What yuh mean?"

"Well, it's plain there's a gang hiding somewhere in the canyons. And they're the ones who rustled Skip and Tex's steers. It's more than we were sure of two hours ago."

"What'll we do now?" Hunch asked. "Wait till mornin' an' try to pick up this sign again?"

Carver shook his head. "Lanning was right, despite the fact that we pushed farther than him. The owlhoots would have been sure to break their trail sooner or later—we'd only waste time in trying to unravel it. We'll do as we said and push on to the Snake country. The moon'll be up after a while. . . . I want a look around that country Strange said he and Harkness camped in."

Candy grumbled, but made no serious demur. Stopping long enough to cook supper and eat it, they pushed south along the broad wall of the mountains. Travel was not easy, but an hour later one of the Teton peaks grew silvery of outline and presently the moon soared into the open. It was better going then.

They were still in the saddle when the moon waned in the west at a late hour. However, they had put a considerable distance behind them, and Jim said they could pull up for the night.

The first faint streaks of dawn found them hustling the coffee over a fire which burned bright orange in the velvet of morning dusk. They were on a high branch of the South Fork of the Snake. All about, tumbled peaks thrust into the brightening pearl sky; awakening birds twittered in the spruce.

The location which Jared Strange had given of his and Harkness's hunting-camp was of the vaguest but Carver believed he had a pretty fair idea where it must lie. All morning they climbed, till the sun at its meridian found them close to timberline. They passed sombre, black-water lakes bordered about by spectral spruce; the tumbling, steely brooks dashed over the granite rocks. When Jim heard the far-off, eerie whistling of a marmot, he knew they were near their destination.

"Strange's camp must have been about at this elevation," he declared; "and not very far from here. We'll look around."

They had their look, without finding either the remains of the camp or anp signs of men whatever. Not far away stood timberline, a zone of gnarled, unbelievably tortured, verdureless cedars. Above it the mountain tundra began—grey rocks and brown moss exposed to the pitiless stare of the heavens.

An hour later, Carver fired his Colt in the air and waited for his companions to come. They crashed through the brush eagerly, only to subside at sight of his gloomy face.

"There's nothing to be found, that's plain," he announced. "And yet—I'd swear the camp must have been somewhere near here. It would practically *have* to be," he concluded thoughtfully. "Unless Strange lied."

Candy said: "Huh!" and they let Jim's suggestion hang in the air for a moment. He said:

"We can't spend all day up here. We'll work down the slope, hunting as we go."

An hour later, the peaks were two thousand feet above them. They had long since realized that they would not find the camp for which they searched.

"What good'll it do if we should stumble on it?" Candy demanded in a disgruntled tone. "If Strange says that both him an' Harkness got lost from there——"

"That's all true," Carver nodded; "but what if there isn't any camp at all?"

"Yuh mean"—Candy's eyes widened—"that mebby neither of them gents really did get lost? That it's all a yarn?"

"What else could it mean?"

"But, dang it; Strange says the rangers found that camp!" Hunch broke in.

"'Strange says'," Carver echoed, smiling. The look of perplexity faded from Hunch and Candy's faces.

"Why, damn his picture!" the latter exploded. "He's been lyin' to all of us—feedin' Heck Lannin' taffy—makin' a fool outa Miss Harkness!" Range shook his voice.

"Hold on," Jim laughed. "I'm not dead sure of that yet. I'll admit it *looks* that way—but we can afford to give Strange the benefit of the doubt."

"How's that?"

"It's simple. His brother-in-law's Box A spread can't be more than a few miles from here. We'll tell Strange we couldn't locate his camp, ask him to take us to it—and see what he says."

"It'd be my way to lay hold of him an' yank the low-down plumb out of 'im!" Candy groused. "I thought from the minute I laid eyes on to him, he was crooked. Now I'm shore of it!"

Jim said: "That may be. But we'll do it my way."

They had no real difficulty in locating the Box A. It lay in a broad mountain valley, the steep wooded ridges running down to its edges. The ranch buildings were in a pretty setting, gathered about by pines. There was a saddle horse standing in the yard when they arrived. Carver gave it a glance and went on to the door.

A lanky, ferret-eyed man met him. "Shore, Jared's here," he said without enthusiasm, in answer to a question. Evidently Strange himself heard Carver's voice, for he called: "Right in here——"

Jim stepped past the ferret-eyed man. From the door of the inner room, he laid his glance on Jared Strange. Heck Lanning was with him. The latter's brows lifted in surprise at sight of Carver.

"Lookin' fer me?" he queried.

"I saw your bronc outside," Jim nodded. "But right now I want to talk to Strange."

"What can I do for you, Carver?" Strange asked.

Jim described his fruitless search for the hunting-camp near timber-line. "It occurred to me that I might find you here," he concluded. "Maybe you'd like to take me up there and show me just where it is."

Strange stared at him as if taken aback by this request. He shook his head then, his tone dry, crisp. "Sorry, Carver; but right now I'm going somewhere with the sheriff."

"Maybe when you get back——"

"No." The Easterner's refusal was final. "There's no telling when that will be."

Jim said: "Where is this long trip taking you?"

"Strange's got a new lead we're follerin' up," Lanning put in as if to close the subject. Jim was still looking at Strange.

"Of course, if you'd rather *not* point out where your camp was, okay," he said quietly. Strange flushed.

"What do you mean?" he retorted. "I see no necessity to place myself at your disposal. Any investigation of yours is being made as a private citizen; you have no authority whatever. Do what you want to, but don't expect me to put myself out for you!"

Lanning nodded. "He's right, Carver," he seconded gruffly. "I think myself that Miss Harkness made a mistake in hirin' you, but it's her business."

He had more to say, but Jim decided he had learned all that he needed to. Strange's flat refusal to take him to the high camp was no surprise; and the fact that Heck Lanning sounded like his echo was little more of one.

Strange and the lawman followed him out to the yard. The Easterner's veiled black eyes played over Candy and Hunch; a look which they returned with interest. Lanning said:

"By the way, Carver. Yuh ain't picked up nothin' new yoreself, I don't s'pose?"

A mirthless smile touched Jim's mouth. "Nothing much, Lanning," he answered. "Except——" He broke off, swinging into the saddle.

Heck caught at that. "Except what?" he queried quickly.

"Why—I remembered a paper that Tex Johnson gave me to hold, before he was killed," was the answer. "It wasn't much, a map or something that I couldn't make head or tail of."

Hunch and Candy stared at the speaker in surprise, but it was on Jared Strange's heavy visage that Carver had concentrated all his attention. Was he mistaken, or did a guarded expression of alertness appear there, only to be smoothed away the next second? "A map?" the sheriff repeated, ears pricking up. "What of?"

Carver shrugged. "Search me. There were some marks on it, but it didn't mean a thing——"

"Where is this paper?" Heck inquired. Jim pretended to search his pockets.

"Darned if I know," he confessed. "With Tex dead, it didn't seem so important any more. . . . Well, we'll be going." He turned his pony.

Lanning would have held him with questions, but he evaded them easily. He and his friends jogged away.

"What was the idee of that?" Candy demanded, when they were beyond earshot. "Was yuh makin' it up?" Carver shook his head.

"The map's real enough," he admitted. "I was keeping it to myself for the time being."

"Then why mention it before them jaspers?" Hunch inquired disgustedly. "An' what'd Strange say about the camp?"

Jim told of his refusal to guide them there. "As for the map, it simply struck me to wonder whether the fact that it existed would mean anything to him."

"An' did it?" Hunch persisted.

"Shore it did!" Candy interposed. "I got that, myself."

They talked it over at length. "Where we headin' now?" Hunch said. "Better git back up in the hills——"

"No, we'll go back to my place," Jim answered. For some reason, he had begun to think about Audrey Harkness again.

"Be mighty late when we git there," Candy grumbled. Jim nodded, adding: "But no later than we can help."

Evening overtook them on the trail. Since they had wasted no time on a meal at midday, they made up for the omission now. It was full dark by the time they started on.

By and by the moon rose. It must have been well after eleven o'clock, and they were crossing a corner of the Padlock land, when suddenly Hunch reigned in with a jerk.

"Look!" he exclaimed, pointing. "Ain't that a man up there?"

Carver made out the faint outline of a horseman high on a rocky eminence. For a moment the man was motionless. Then he disappeared.

"Who kin that be?" Candy burst out. "Looked like he was watchin' us——"

The same thought was in Jim's mind. He lost no time in idle cogitation, however. "He'll be working north down the ridge," he muttered. "Swing that way and spread out—we'll just talk to him!"

Jamming the spurs home, they raced through the shadows. Five minutes saw them at the point where they believed the mysterious rider must come out. He was nowhere to be found.

"He spotted us, all right," Hunch rasped. "He must'a took wing an' flew!"

"Keep hunting," Jim directed curtly. "Anybody nosing around here is of interest to us!"

They pursued their search with enthusiasm, but with no better results. Evidently the solitary horseman, whom they could no longer doubt was spying on them, had made good his escape. Half-an-hour later Carver was willing to admit defeat.

"We'll push on to the J.C.," he said. "There's a chance we can pick up some sign to-morrow in daylight. But right now I want to know everything's all right at the spread."

It did not strike them as strange when, well after midnight, they approached the ranch, to find no light burning there. Audrey Harkness would have retired two hours ago.

"Reckon we better bunk in th' barn," Hunch observed. But Jim, without saying anything, strode away for a look about the house. A few minutes later, Hunch and Candy heard his cry of alarm. Running that way, they burst into the kitchen. A litter of broken crockery was strewn about the floor; a broken chair sagged; the table had been overthrown. Carver stared at them, holding up the candle he had found and lit.

"Miss Harkness is gone!" he ejaculated. "She's not in her room! The place has been ransacked—wrecked!"

CHAPTER X

LANNING and Jared Strange watched Carver and his companions ride away. A furrow creased the sheriff's roan forehead.

"It gits me, what Carver said about that paper," he muttered. "He says Johnson give it to 'im . . . with marks on it. What could that be a map of?" He was turning the circumstances over in his slow way.

"Carver's keen," Strange replied. "If he can't make anything out of it, it probably doesn't amount to much." He spoke carelessly, appearing to dispose of the subject. "What bothers me," he pursued, with a semblance of concern, "is him and those other men roaming around through the mountains this way. Why, they're liable to ruin any leads we've got to work on, Lanning!" He hesitated. "Couldn't you put it up to Carver in a nice way that you preferred him to mind his own affairs?"

Heck rubbed his jaw, a habitual gesture with him.

"Dunno's I could go that fur," he responded cautiously. "Reckon he's got a right to go where he pleases."

"But if he's interfering, no matter how unintentionally, with the course of justice?"

"If I find him doin' that, I'll speak up quick enough," Lanning declared firmly. "Until then, I dunno's there's anything I can do."

Strange shrugged his blocky shoulders, letting the subject drop.

"Get yore bronc," the sheriff told him. "We'll shove off. No point in wastin' time."

The lead of which he had spoken was uppermost in his mind now. It was the stripped hide of a steer, bearing the Padlock brand, which Strange said he had found thrust into a crevice in the rocks half-a-dozen miles away in the hills. It was their intention of going to the spot for a look around.

"Be right with you," Strange nodded. First, however, he stepped back into the house.

"Ike," he murmured to the ferret-eyed man, who appeared to have been waiting, "did you get what Carver said about that map?"

"Yeh." Ike's eyes were glinting with avarice. "Do yuh reckon it's a map of the cache?"

Strange made a gesture. "There's no sense wondering about it," he said flatly. There was unconscious authority in his tone. "I aim to find out!"

"How?"

"Leave that to me." Strange thought a moment. "Lanning and I will be going," he said then. "As soon as we're out of sight, you saddle up and fog it over to the boys—tell them to meet me in Skeleton Canyon. I'll get rid of Lanning and go straight there. Hustle!"

Ike nodded assent. Turning on his heel, Strange grabbed up the rifle which had been his excuse for coming in. Then he left, making for the corrals. He was soon ready to go. He and Lanning rode out of the yard.

They had scarcely disappeared at the edge of the pines before Ike hurried out to the pens, threw saddle on a mettlesome roan pony, and swung aboard. A moment later he was racing away in another direction.

Strange led the sheriff up the long, pine-clothed slopes. It was an hour before they reached a little hollow at the head of a canyon where rocks cropped out everywhere.

"I was coming down through here, feeling mighty dry," he explained, "when I thought I heard water. I looked around. The hide I spoke of is shoved into that crack over there——" He pointed. "It can't be more than two or three days old."

Lanning got down heavily and had his look. He found the hide. Pulling it into the open, he spread it out. There could be no mistaking the Padlock brand burned into the flank.

"Owlhoot work," he grunted. "I reckon they git mighty hungry fer beef."

Getting to his feet, he had his look round. Strange let him find the spot where the steer had been killed. But when Heck cast about for some sign of the men who had done it, he was at a loss. He wasn't able to see a thing.

"Fine chance to track 'em to their hide-out," he said, "if we kin find any trace of 'em at all."

It was what Strange had been waiting for.

"We can search around here," he put in quickly. "It's just possible we can pick up their sign——"

He would not have been so helpful had he believed that to be the case. But he knew better. He had himself thrust the hide into the rocks, perfectly aware that there was nothing to be found for miles around. Yet he got back into the saddle with alacrity and started away. Lanning followed suit. Within five minutes they were beyond hearing of each other.

Making sure of that, Strange promptly turned his horse down the slope and rapidly made away from the spot, concluding that the sheriff had enough to occupy him to keep him out of circulation for some time. Once he had put a ridge between them, Strange struck in the spurs and made fast time. He knew the way to Skeleton Canyon. It was a long ride, but he did not complain; time was the essence of his plans now, and he was making time steadily at this pace.

Skeleton Canyon was a gloomy, shadowed defile crowned by battlemented walls of granite. Here and there a high rugged spire, touched with an orange glow from the west, warned him that evening was getting on. Near the point where the canyon pinched in to a width of only a few yards, turning a sharp bend, a man suddenly stepped into the trail directly in his path. There was a rifle in his hands.

"You, Strange?" he grunted, lowering his gun as he recognized the other.

Strange's nod was curt. "Have the boys come?" His answer was a snort.

"An' Bill's kinda peeved, too," the man supplied. "Says he's gettin' fed up with this runnin' all over fer nothin'——"

Strange shrugged unemotionally. "Bill's too big for his pants sometimes," was all he said.

Pushing past, he went on down the narrowing gorge. At length it widened out suddenly into a round valley, hemmed in by unscalable three-hundred-foot cliffs. Grass grew here, and a half-dozen discouraged cottonwoods. A stream tumbled down the rocks at one side. There was a dilapidated log cabin near the centre of the valley. Some saddle horses dozed beside the lean-to which had been built against its back.

A man stood in the low door. He saw Strange, and turned back inside to say something. A moment later, a number of men began to crowd outside. All were roughly

clad, heavily armed, and devil-may-care in appearance, with flinty faces and hard eyes. One, bigger than the rest, with broad shoulders, and a challenging air about him, stepped to the fore.

"Wal, Strange," he began gruffly. "What's it all about this time?"

Strange shot him an inscrutable look. He took his time about answering, dismounting and stretching his legs.

"News, Stack," he responded at last, tersely.

Bill Stack only stared bleakly, but one of the others exclaimed gruffly: "Huh! What's doin', Strange?" He was deeply curious, as were his companions. All hung on the answer.

"Jim Carver," said Strange impressively, "has got a map that Tex Johnson gave him to hold, shortly before he cashed." He waited for the intelligence to sink in. That they found sufficient significance in it was evident from their reactions. Eyes sharpened, a man leaned forward tensely.

"Has he got it on 'im?" he demanded.

Strange weighed that, before shaking his head. "That's too much to expect of him, Curly."

"Does he know what it means?" It was another who spoke this time. These voices were coarse and low-pitched with the keenness of their attention.

Again Strange shook a negative.

"I doubt it."

"How do yuh know it's a map of the cache?" Bill Stack thrust in, in a tone of hostility. "Who made it—an' where'd it come from?"

Strange eyed him levelly. "Think it over, Stack," he retorted quietly. "We know Johnson and Lang stumbled across the first cache. There wasn't any map in it when it was buried, because Reb and I were there together. But we were separated afterward, remember. Reb had most of the money still on him. When he was finally killed, half a day later, it was gone. So we know he buried it somewhere—all alone. . . . The trouble is," he proceeded, "that we've all been too willing to believe Reb was crooked. That he intended to make away with that money himself."

"Well?" Stack prompted crustily.

"Suppose this," Strange took him up. He was speaking more for the benefit of the others than for Stack, but Bill did not know that. "Suppose Reb had every intention of whack-

ing up with us fair. But he got cornered. He buried the haul to get rid of it, and later was driven past the first cache. We know that much happened. What we overlooked is that he *may* have drawn a map and stuck it in the can with the money Johnson and Lang found. That," he concluded, "would have explained their ramming all over the hills as they did—and you can't explain it any other way."

Stack exploded: "But dammit, why should we need a map? We know jest where Reb Battle went that day—or dang near anyway. There couldn't be many places to hide the money he had on him. We've looked everywhere. I'll swear there's nothin' around the Padlock. I turned that place upside down, done everything but tear it log from log!"

"How'd yuh find out about this map, Strange?" one of the renegades interposed.

Strange related the conversation at the Box A. "I may be crazy in thinking he was asking himself what effect the information would have on me," he confessed. "He didn't learn anything. The thing is, if he didn't think of it beforehand, he'll know now that somebody is interested in that map. He pretended to Lanning that he didn't know where it was; but he knows all right. And I'll bet a wall-eyed broomtail I know too!"

"Where is it, then?"

"It's somewhere in his ranch-house."

They looked at one another. "Yuh think he headed fer there when he left yuh?" a man spoke up.

"I'm almost positive of it. And unless I'm mistaken, he'll remove that map to a safer place——"

"Reckon we better git there before he does, then!" It was Curly who spoke. Strange nodded.

"I thought you'd see it that way. . . . Carver and his friends," he proceeded, "won't be shoving their broncs. That means we've got several hours to work in—maybe all night. But there's no use taking risks."

"What if they're at our heels when we git down to the J.C.?" someone queried. Strange's grin was mirthless.

"We'll know how to take care of that," he retorted coolly. "But I don't think we'll have to go that far—not yet, anyway. The thing to do now is to stir our stumps."

He started for his horse, grazing near at hand, but paused as if asking himself what Bill Stack would have to say. There had always been friction between these two. Stack had been

Reb Battle's right bower three or four months ago; he had never approved the outlaw's taking up with Strange, perhaps previsioning the time when he and the latter would come to grips over the question of who should be leader of the gang. That time was here now.

Never by word or sign had Strange given open evidence of his desire to usurp Stack's self-assumed leadership; but the latter was beginning all too well to read the direction of his suavity, if the others did not.

Bill was standing there still, a scowl on his craggy visage as if weighing things in his mind. The others had gone for ther horses. "Come on, Bill—shake a leg!" Curly tossed at him over his shoulder. "We gotta git movin'——"

Stack shot Strange a malignant look, shrugged his big shoulders, and turned to his mount. Only then did the tension run out of Jared Strange's muscles. Something told him that the day would come when Stack would kick over the traces suddenly. Then it would be one or the other. Strange did not intend to let the test find him unprepared.

The guard at the canyon's mouth came running at a haloo which echoed up the rocks. A word sufficed to acquaint him with what was afoot. A moment later, they jogged down the canyon, eight strong. The way led up a steep rocky defile which appeared about to pinch out again and again. But it always opened up. Twenty minutes later they climbed out of the canyon and pushed on over the ridges.

It was dark now, only the dull star-shine lighting their way. Yet there was no hesitation, for not only liberty, but life itself, had more than once depended for these men on their thorough knowledge of the high country.

The moon rose as they came out above the Midnight range. The Padlock ranch-house was a vague blot far below on its grassy flat beside the creek.

"Yuh reckon Carver an' them others are anywhere around yet?" Curly inquired, pushing up beside Strange.

The latter decried the likelihood. "They had a long way to come, and they'd already travelled far," he said. "It would be more likely for them to hole up for the night somewheres."

"But that map——?"

Strange was uncomfortably conscious of it. Not yet had he satisfied himself of Carver's object in mentioning it at all. It was hard to persuade himself the other would have done so

if it were not in a safe place. And yet, he counted no little on discovering the whereabouts of the cache it was supposed to mark. The money in the cache was his own, in a manner of speaking. At least his claim to it was better than that of any other living person. Well, almost. Unconsciously he chuckled at the thought.

"What's so funny?" Curly demanded. Strange brushed that aside, however.

"Be a good idea if one of the boys stuck here on the Midnight to toll Carver off when he shows up," he said to Stack. Bill mulled the proposal grumpily. Evidently he found it sound, for he turned to one of the others, saying:

"Okay, Nick; I reckon yo're elected."

Nick Larson nodded. Turning his bronc out, he pulled away. "Let 'em see yuh if yuh have to," Stack called after him. "But hold 'em back fer a while anyway."

It was not far to Carver's ranch now. Coming in sight of the place an hour later, Curly drew rein wtih a jerk.

"Hell!" he burst out. "Carver's here ahead of us! . . . There's a light down there!"

They saw the golden daub marking a window of the J.C. ranch-house. Before anything more could be said, however, Strange thrust in: "Don't go off half-cocked, boys. That's not Carver down there at all. I'd almost guarantee it."

They turned to him for an explanation.

"Harkness's daughter is stayin' there," he told them, a smile beginning to wreathe his lips. "If I ain't mistaken, she's holding the fort to-night—alone."

There was a moment's silence, and then Stack exclaimed hoarsely: "That gurl yuh was tellin' us about, Strange? The good looker? . . . She's down there all by 'erself?"

"That's right," Strange nodded.

Stack appeared gathering himself for an effort. Suddenly he jammed his spurs in. "Come on—we're gittin' down there!" he cried. His horse started with a jump. He swept down the slope at a reckless speed, the others at his heels.

CHAPTER XI

IN the ranch-house on the Stepping Stone, Candy and Hunch stared at Carver while the silence stretched out following his disastrous announcement. Candy was the first to break it.

"Who could'a wanted to grab her—an' what for?" he demanded blankly.

Jim did not answer immediately. Picking up a broken dish from the floor, he dropped some melted wax on it, and set the candle upright. Righting the table then with shaking hands, he placed the light on it.

"I don't know," he said slowly, straightening to glance about. "I don't know."

"It can't be her money they're holdin' 'er for," Hunch declared. "She said she sent her father nearly all he had——"

"Nobody'd be fool 'nough to hope to scare us off by takin' her away to close her mouth," Candy added.

Carver was picking up pans and kettles and laying them away. His troubled face was thoughtful. He tried to straighten the broken chair, watched it sag down, and turned away. Picking up the dish holding the candle, he stepped into the other room.

It was larger than the kitchen, containing a table and some easy chairs. Saddles lay in a corner, and there were bridles hanging from hooks. A shelf had contained a pile of magazines and papers which lay strewn on the floor. Less damage had been done here; but plainly the room had been thoroughly ransackd. Even the canvas ceiling, nailed up to conceal the rough construction overhead, sagged a little as if someone had taken a look behind it.

Little by little, as he took in the confusion here, a conviction was borne in on Carver which before he had not for a moment thought of entertaining. Now it was beginning to take a firm hold.

"Yuh looked in here, uh course," Candy grunted, moving towards the door of Audrey Harkness's room. He pushed back the door. The bed—the sole one in the house—had been tumbled and pulled about, its blankets dumped on the floor. The drawers of a wooden bureau were flung in a heap in the corner, their contents spilling. The girl's suitcases had been accorded the same treatment.

On first entering the house, Carver had given the room no more than a hasty glance to assure himself of Audrey's absence. Now he had a careful look, hoping for some clue to the inexplicable which had been overlooked. It was the same room which he had always known, save for the addition of the girl's filmy clothing, in a heap by her bags or flung over a chair; and yet, he was deeply conscious of her presence here. He saw again her candid brown eyes, gazing quietly into his, and pictured the proudly careless set of her head. The thought tightened his mouth.

"Damn him!" he burst out unwarningly. "I'll square accounts with him for this!"

Candy and Hunch gazed at him, startled.

"Huh?" the latter said. "Square accounts with who, Jim? What yuh talkin' about?"

"It's Jared Strange," Jim grunted shortly. "This is his work! I'd swear to it!"

They only stared their growing puzzlement.

"How do yuh make that out?" Candy queried.

"That map is at the bottom of it," Carver responded. "I was a fool to even mention it!" There was bitterness in his tone. "I see it all now—and if you look at the facts, you'll see the same. Strange had plenty of time to get over here ahead of us. And that gent we saw on the Midnight range—we wasted half an hour trying to nab him. Small wonder we didn't. It was his job to keep us busy while his friends went through the house here!"

Candy grunted as the impact of the circumstances came home.

"Then yuh mean they was here only a little while ago—an hour at the outside?"

Jim nodded curtly. "Miss Harkness may be only two or three miles away this very minute, for all I know—if only we knew in what direction!"

Hunch said harshly: "Wal, we kin make a stab at locatin' her, anyway!"

Carver hesitated. His every instinct prompted him to dash in pursuit; but intelligence told him to go slow. He shook his head.

"It would be foolish to try to do anything now. Our one chance is to wait for daylight."

"What about the map?" Candy interposed. "They didn't git it, did they?"

Carver had been too agitated to satisfy himself about that. He went now to his bunk, from which everything but the bare planks had been torn, and started to look in his hiding-place. For a moment, then, his heart stopped. It began to pump again furiously as, running his fingers farther along the aperture, they encountered the paper he sought. He drew it out.

"It's still here."

"Let's have a look——"

Candy and Hunch bent their heads over the map with interest. Slowly they spelled out the few words printed on it. All that it had to offer was soon absorbed. Candy tossed it on the table.

"Hell, that ain't no map," he growled. "A map's s'posed to tell yuh jest where to go——"

"Dang queer them hombres come here fer it, an' then went away without it," Hunch added. "How many do yuh reckon there was of 'em?"

"From the cigarette butts strewn around, I'd say half a dozen," Jim answered.

Hunch nodded as if expecting as much. "How come they didn't wait an' nab us—an' make shore of the map?" he inquired unanswerably. As he spoke, he shot a glance at the window as if expecting the renegades to return at any moment.

Carver could only shake his head. There were many things about this case he was working on which perplexed him deeply.

"'Nother thing yuh overlooked," Candy declared. "Yuh say Strange could'a got over here in time to forestall us. But when we left him, he was goin' some'eres with Heck Lanin'. The sheriff wouldn't consent to no such rough-stuff as this, no matter how much he's under Strange's thumb.

"If I haven't got him all wrong," Jim said slowly, "Jared Strange is mighty deep. He would know how to shake Lanning quick enough at need."

Candy turned it over thoughtfully, a dubious expression on his long face. Finally he shook his head positively.

"I think yuh got it all wrong, Jim," he said. "I'm admittin' I don't have no likin' fer Mister Queer myself; but all this yo're sayin' is pure guess-work. There ain't a thing yuh kin pin on Strange an' make it stick!"

Jim scarcely needed to be reminded of just how tenuous his hypothesis was.

"Admitting all that," he retorted, "don't overlook the fact that from the beginning Strange has interested himself in everything connected with this case. He showed up on this range with Miss Harkness; and he's even been giving Heck Lanning orders. . . . Whenever I'm inclined to pass him over as harmless I remember that again, and it sticks in my crop!"

"Wal, the thing to do, then," Candy declared, "is to forget Harkness, an' Skip an' Tex, an' everything else, an' concentrate on nailin' Mister Queer with the goods."

"I intend to do that before I'm done," Carver said grimly. "But first on the programme is to run down the skunks who treated Miss Harkness this way." He added no more, but his tone said that he would leave no stone unturned until it was done, and that when he found them it would go hard with the men who were responsible.

"Wal—won't be long before we have 'nough light to start out," Hunch commented. He picked up a fallen chair and shoved it towards the wall with his foot. The chair banged against the plank partition on which that end of the canvas ceiling had been nailed, and at the jar, the canvas tore loose with a dull ripping sound. To their amazement, then, it suddenly gave way.

Before their startled eyes, a bulky object which had evidently been hastily thrust on to a cross-plank behind the concealment of the canvas, came tumbling down. Carver was the nearest; had he not moved quickly, the object would have struck him. As it was, he had time to catch it in his arms, staggering with the impact of its weight.

For a moment he stared, unable to believe his eyes. It was Audrey Harkness whom he half-supported—bound hand and foot so effectively that she could scarcely move, and with a gag thrust in her mouth. She was conscious, however. Her wide-torn eyes sought his, commanding him to release her in all haste.

"Good Lord!" he exclaimed incredulously. "And in a short time, we would have been out scouring the mountains for her!"

Quickly he slipped off the gag, and with his knife started to hack at her bonds.

"Are you all right, ma'am?" he pleaded. "They didn't hurt you badly?" His tone was hoarse, and Candy, gazing at him, noted an unusual absence of blood in his face.

"I'm—numb all—over," the girl moaned.

Carver had her released a moment later. Supporting her, he bade her try to walk. She took a few tottering steps, but it was some time before circulation was restored to the point of comfort.

"I feel better now," she murmured finally. She took the dipper of water which Hunch offered her, and drank thirstily. When she spoke again, her voice was almost normal. "There! . . . I never expected to be as comfortable again. How fortunate that I tumbled down as I did!" She shuddered slightly. "I think I could hear nearly every word you said, but far away. I knew you were intending to leave. . . . I simply couldn't move."

"Audrey—what happened?" Jim demanded imperatively, unconscious of using her given name in the stress of his anxiety. "Who did this to you, and why? When did it happen?"

"It must have been nearly two hours ago. I was just thinking of going to bed when I heard horses. I thought it might be you returning, and foolishly I rushed to the door." The first touch of returning colour stained her cheeks as she made the statement. At another time, Jim would have made much of its implications; but now he was concerned only for what had happened. "I learned my mistake though, when a tall, broad-shouldered man called out to me. He flung off his horse near the porch steps and came forward——"

"A range man, of course?" Jim interposed. She nodded.

"I tried to slam the door shut, but I was too late. He thrust it back and grabbed me. Almost before I knew it, his companions were crowding into the kitchen. He kept looking at me——

"'Where is it, lady?' he said.

"I will admit I was half-frightened out of my wits. I had no idea what he was talking about. Perhaps it was money. I begged him to let me go—he was still holding my wrist, and his fingers hurt. I promised to hand him my pocket-book if only he would free me. There were a few dollars in it, and some pieces of jewellery——"

"Excuse me. But you didn't recognize any of these men, Audrey? They were total strangers to you?"

"Of course." She looked at him as if wondering what was in the back of his mind. "I can assure you that just

then I was fervently hoping I should never see them again! But it was not my money they were after."

"No," Jim agreed, "it wasn't."

She appeared surprised. "The map. That's what their leader said it was that he wanted. Bill, they called him——"

"Describe him for me," Carver thrust in. Audrey did so. The man had carried himself with out-thrust jaw, as if attempting by pugnacity to offset a constitutional indecision of mind; and there had been a scar on the side of his neck. Jim's eyes hardened as he listened, and he shot Candy and Hunch a look.

"Reb Battle's old crowd," Candy declared. "That's Bill Stack she's describin'!"

"You know him, then?" She seemed glad that she had been able to help. "At any rate, I had to tell him that I knew nothing of any map. He pretended to believe I was lying. He turned my wrist till I thought it would break——" She rubbed it tenderly, and then pluckily smiled.

"They got to arguing amongst themselves," she went on. "A man they called Curly stood up for me. I thought he meant to draw a gun on Stack. Some of the others had been making remarks about me which I should prefer not to repeat; I think they intended taking me away with them. At any rate, they began to go through the house. I thought"—she glanced about—"the damage must be much worse than it is. They left nothing unturned, certainly. Meanwhile, Stack and another man gave over questioning me, and I was tied up. Curly complained that they were wasting too much time; all the while they were here, they had kept a careful watch outside."

"Expecting us," Jim nodded.

"Finally they were ready to go. I gathered they hadn't found what they were hunting for; and they were angry. There was another argument about what they were going to do with me. It was Curly who suggested putting me behind the canvas. He seemed decent in many ways. I believe he hoped you might find me there somehow. The canvas, which had been left hanging after they ripped it down, was fastened up once more when they had lifted me up there. I suppose I might have tumbled myself down shortly after they left; but tied up as I was, I was afraid of breaking bones. . . ."

That was the gist of her story. There were details con-

cerning which Carver inquired, but these only served to embellish what he already knew. Again and again his mind circled back to one point.

"You're sure you didn't recognize any of those men?" he asked for the second time. And at her negative: "You say a strict watch was kept while they were here. Could there have been a man left outside, who didn't come in at all?"

She gazed at him with widening eyes. "Isn't that odd!" she exclaimed. "Do you know, after I was put up there and the canvas replaced, I had the idea that someone I had not seen had entered and was looking around. He sounded like one in authority, angry over something—perhaps their failure to find the map. But I decided I must be mistaken."

Carver stood there, gazing at her for once in a manner which said that he was really looking far beyond. When he spoke, his tone was pitched low:

"Audrey, you should be able to tell me this. Did his voice remind you of Jared Strange's?"

She started to speak, and then hesitated. The strain in Carver's face made clear how anxiously he awaited her answer. And yet, in the end she disappointed him.

"I should like to say yes," she replied finally. "But I can't—not honestly. The words were rough and harsh. They might have been disguised. But . . ." She stopped, and a startled look overspread her features. "Surely you don't believe Jared Strange had anything to do with this?" she demanded.

He was as frank as she. "I most certainly do," he said flatly. "But believing is one thing, and proving is quite another. It looks," he added with a rueful twist of his lips, "as though we'd tackled considerable of a job in pinning this business home where it belongs." He was silent for a moment, and when he spoke again it was on another topic altogether.

"I don't suppose anything was dropped in your hearing that would serve as a hint to where your father is being held?"

For the first time, the girl appeared about to crack. All her bravery ran out of her, and her proud head dropped. "No," she sighed. "From all that I was able to catch, those men might never have guessed that I had a father."

"It don't mean anything," he hastened to reassure her. "That bunch is a cagy outfit; they'd be careful not to drop a word that might work against themselves. . . . We'll get your dad out of this yet, if it can be done."

CHAPTER XII

It seemed for ever before dawn came that morning. No one thought of sleep. Audrey, despite the poise she displayed, was too upset by her experience. Carver was engrossed by the problems which confronted him. As for Hunch, he thought they should take the girl to town for safety's sake, and said so.

"Nonsense," Jim told him shortly. "Nothing will happen to her now."

Hunch was obdurate. "Stack's crowd didn't git what they come fer," he declared, "an' they outnumber us. It ain't fair to her."

They were talknig in the yard, beyond Audrey's hearing; but the girl seemd to know of it. It was not ten minutes before she appeared at the door. She stood there, faintly limned by thin dawn light. Thinking she wanted him, Carver went to her at once.

"I suppose you feel I should not remain here after what has happened," she began at once. For a moment, he didn't know what to say.

"That's for you to say, ma'am," he answered finally. "I don't want you to run unnecessary risks, but——"

"I prefer to stay," she announced quietly. "I should hate to confess even to myself that I had been frightened away. Those men have done all they possibly could. They won't catch me unprepared another time."

He smiled, even while her bravery got to him. He knew it was not pretence. Audrey was deeply concerned for her father. Her staunch faith that he still lived made Harkness's plight all the more real to Carver, and threw urgency into the necessity to locate him.

"You may stay, of course," he said. "I'm glad that you feel that way about it. But I'm afraid I'll have to ask Mrs. Conroe to stay with you. I wouldn't feel right otherwise." He did not add that in any event he did not intend to leave the place unguarded again.

"I have no right to make you feel that you have a further responsibility to me," she acknowledged. "Go for Mrs. Conroe if you must——"

"I'll fetch her first thing this morning, if she'll come," he nodded, turning away.

Hunch's apprehensions subsided somewhat when Jim told him and Candy what he proposed doing.

"That's usin' yore head," Hunch pretended to grumble; "givin' us two wimmen to look after instead uh one!" But his manner expressed relief.

"Miss Harkness is not selfishly thinking of herself," Jim rebuked him quietly. "It's her father she's worried about. She wants to help. If you were in her position, you'd feel the same way."

"I s'pose I would," Hunch allowed grudgingly.

That Audrew was by no means helpless she demonstrated a moment later, when she called them to the house. She had asked Candy to build a fire in the stove, and under her eyes he had made awkward shift to comply, escaping at the first possible moment. The girl had proceeded to make coffee.

"There are few enough dishes left," she said, when they trooped in, sniffing hungrily; "but perhaps we can all manage somehow." With a floursack apron tied about her, she fried bacon and eggs for them. Hunch and Candy thawed rapidly under these ministrations. But Jim could not help asking himself if she did these things to keep up her courage.

"By gravy, she's the real thing!" Hunch exclaimed unctuously, when they retired once more to the corrals. "Nothin' lily-handed about her! She kin stay fer all uh me."

Carver got away presently, saying he would be back as soon as he could. Morning sunlight had thrown a saner light on the whole situation, and he felt confident as he headed his bronc across the Stepping Stone and into the hills. An hour brought him to Ed Conroe's little C Bar spread.

"Ed, I want to run off with your wife," he told the grizzled, thin-faced rancher who met him in the yard.

Conroe laughed. "Reckon yuh kin gain her consent to that, Carver?"

Jim explained how matters stood at the J. C., and what was wanted. Mrs. Conroe herself, a buxom, motherly woman with a kind face, her hair already beginning to turn white, joined them while they were talking. She had only to hear of Audrey's plight before falling in with the plan.

"Why, the poor thing!" she exclaimed, all sympathy in an instant. "Of course I'll stay with her, Jim! Ed and the boys'll have to git along somehow for a few days. Wait till I change my dress and put on my hat."

Conroe hitched up the ranch wagon while she was getting ready. "I'll drive Addie over myself, Carver," he offered. "Reckon I kin be spared that long."

"Fine," Jim took him up. "I want to run in to town, and it'll save me going back to the spread."

He made short work of the ride to Medicine Dance. Prepared as he was for disappointment, it was a surprise to find Heck Lanning at his office beside the jail this morning.

"Howdy, Lanning," Carver greeted him. "Have any luck running down Jared Strange's lead the other day?"

Heck showed him a disgruntled visage. "No," he said shortly. And at Jim's lifted brows: "Me an' Strange got separated that afternoon by accident. I didn't locate a thing, myself; an' I dunno whether he did or not——"

"You mean you didn't find him again? Carver hung on the answer. The other's grumpy headshake was not unexpected.

After a few minutes' sparring, Heck opened up about the stripped Padlock hide. Jim listened attentively. He thought he read the facts easily enough. It sounded as though Strange had tolled the sheriff into the hills and deliberately sidetracked him. It coincided with Jim's picture of the Easterner's activities. More than ever he was convinced that Strange was playing a deep game.

"Lanning," he said finally, "I want some information that you can give me."

"Fire away," said Heck. But his tone was guarded.

"It's about Reb Battle. You were with the posse that smoked him and drove his gang out of the Tetons. I want to trace his movements as closely as possible from the time you first crossed his trail."

The sheriff's face cleared. There was nothing in this information that, to his knowledge, he need hold back. He complied with an account of the outlaw's pursuit. There had been an abortive attempt on the bank, south at Montpelier the day before, and Battle's crowd had been recognized. A posse had trailed them through the Salt Range and into the Tetons. Capture being delayed, the posse had called for reinforcements, and Lanning had answered with a number of deputies.

Almost by accident Battle's sign had been cut. There had followed a pitched battle in Grizzly Canyon, which had ended only when the owlhoot gang broke and fled. Two of

their number had been killed; the others succeeded in making their escape. But Battle himself, a plucky red-haired wolf of a man, had been spotted attempting to slip away. Driven hard, he had holed up for several hours at the old Padlock ranch, where single-handed he had held off the entire posse. As darkness fell that night, it was planned to close in on him; but nobody wanted to walk into the ranch-house and place him in custody, and the delay was a mistake. Somehow, Battle had slipped through the cordon. He would have got clear away but for the fact that he was wounded. They followed him the next morning by the trail of blood. The way led back to Grizzly Canyon and beyond. At length the outlaw had been shot down in a nameless box-canyon.

Carver turned the information over musingly. It confirmed not a few of his own ideas. Thanking Lanning, he headed back for the J. C. without delay. Not till he was a mile from town did it occur to him that he had omitted to acquaint the lawman with the attack on his ranch the previous night. He drew up, wondering whether he should turn back and rectify the omission at once. But finally he went on.

"Lanning makes no bones of withholding information that might be of use to me," he reflected. "Not that I care whether he learns of Stack's raid or not. No real damage was done——"

Reaching the ranch, it was to find Mrs. Conroe installed and Candy and Hunch impatiently awaiting his return. "Where yuh been foggin' off to now?" the latter demanded.

"I went to town for a talk with Lanning." Carver told the results of his investigations.

"I could'a told yuh most of that," Candy grumbled.

"That may be," Jim responded coolly. "But I wanted to know it all, Candy."

"Wal, what'd it tell yuh?"

Carver said: "I'm working on that map idea. I'm sold now on the notion that it marks a cache—and since Stack's crowd doesn't know where it is, it may well have been money that Battle himself buried. I think he buried it the day he was killed, or else the day before."

"Purty far-fetched," Hunch grunted, pursing his lips.

Jim admitted as much. "But not impossible. And how else do you account for the fact that none of his crowd know just where to look?"

"Somethin' in that——"

"You can bet that Stack's bunch know every move Battle made. They've gone over every inch of his trail—or think they have. They're still doing it. Probably it's what brought them back to this country after being driven out."

Candy said: "What's all this pointin' to, anyways?"

"Stack," Jim told him, "is holding Harkness. That means we've got to locate Stack's hide-out. And the only way of doing that would seem to be to trail the gang to it——"

"Yuh won't do it by the sign they left here last night," Hunch threw in, "because I tried."

Carver grinned. "I could have told you that. And that's why it's important to know where to pick up some member of that crowd." He added: "If we can't do it by trailing, we can watch where they go anyway."

They got his drift at once. "Sho'! Never thought uh that," Candy admitted. "Wal . . . what's next?"

"The Midnight range seems to be where Stack is concentrating," said Jim. "They killed Skip and Tex, and drove off their Padlock stuff. Apparently they're succeeded in discouraging every man who ever attempted to make a go of the spread. We saw a man there last night. . . . What more do you want?"

"Yuh mean we'll start watchin' the Padlock—is that it?"

Jim nodded. "It's the best I've got to offer right now."

"Wal, let's git goin'!"

"Hold on." Carver's grin returned. "One of us has got to stick around where he can watch the ranch. I don't aim to have last night repeated."

Hunch stared at him for a moment. "Oh, hell!" he burst out disgustedly. "Reckon I know I'm elected. Go on, then—clear out, an' lemme be in peace——"

Jim shook his head. "You're coming with us. We may be watched this minute. . . . All *your* watching will be from the hills, Hunchie."

Hunch saw the sense of that. A few minutes later they rode away from the ranch. On the first ridge, Hunch cut and Jim and Candy went on alone.

Reaching the Padlock, they sized up the situation. "Yuh reckon we'll spot anybody in the daytime?" Candy queried.

Carver shrugged. "Who knows?"

They rode to the point at which they had seen the mysterious horseman the night before. He had been no apparition; they found the tracks of his pony on the high ridge crest. Within a hundred yards, however, they faded out on rocky going.

"Don't matter much," Candy grunted. "We know he was set to toll us off while his friends was busy——"

Jim said; "We'll see if we can learn where he did go, anyway."

They failed utterly.

"Damn their hides!" Candy burst out. "They're a smart bunch, Jim; no gettin' around that."

"I keep thinking about that dozen head of Padlock steers they shoved into the hills. Maybe we can stumble over something in that direction."

An hour's ride brought them to where the trail of the beeves had eluded them. But they had given up then because of darkness. To-day they searched widely, yet without any more satisfactory result. Carver shook his head.

"You're dead right, Candy. They're a wily crowd. I'm afraid if a piece of luck doesn't come our way, we'll be too late to do Harkness much good——"

"Yuh reckon they'd kill 'im?"

"If they haven't already. But Harkness must have business associates in New York. Stack might well be trying to get him to send to them for additional money. I meant to speak to Miss Harkness about it."

They turned back towards the Midnight range as they talked it over. Dusk fell while they were on the way.

"No point in stickin' here at night," Candy observed. "Reckon them birds know they can't find nothin' in the dark." Carver laughed at his reversing his own stand.

"We don't know what they'll be doing," he said. "They may have had a bellyful of the place by this time. It's the chance we'll have to take."

They had brought cold food with them, and ate in the saddle. The first part of the night passed quietly. The moon soared over the barrier ranges at eleven o'clock, round and golden. "If they need light," Candy muttered, "I reckon this is the kind uh night they'd be waitin' fer——"

Cruising the wooded ridges, they kept watch with unremitting vigilance. Time passed, and nothing happened. The moon arched over and began its downward

coast; the shadows grew long and black, and still the Midnight range appeared deserted.

They had long since ceased to hope for developments on this night, when suddenly the lanky puncher stiffened in the saddle. "Jim!" he exclaimed guardedly. "There's two, three hombres ridin' up the hollow—"

He was right. Carver had already spotted the half-concealed group below in the shadows. They were riding in the direction of the Padlock ranch-house. Coming into the light briefly, they cut a clear silhouette, and Carver counted three of them. It did not take him long to decide that they were a part of Stack's crowd.

"We'll just tail those gents," he whispered.

In country as broken as this, it was at once easy and difficult. At least they were able to keep the trio in sight most of the time, without danger of losing them. That the men were making for the Padlock there could no longer be any doubt.

Ten minutes later they rode into the ranch yard. The place had an eerie loneliness at this hour; long inky shadows draped the house. The three men dismounted and began to move about. Carver was all curiosity in a flash.

"What can they be up to?" he murmured. "We'll just crawl up closer and find out——"

He and Candy were crouched in a stony gully at the moment, their broncs a hundred yards away in the pines. They felt safe enough from discovery. But before either of them could move to comply with Jim's proposal, a cool, amused voice spoke up from behind them.

"Jest stay where yuh are, gents; only lift yore hands, slow an' careful," it said. "Never mind tryin' to turn yore heads. I'd shore hate to blast yuh fer a little thing like that!"

CHAPTER XIII

CONSTERNATION struck at Carver in the tense moment that followed the words. He froze. Candy did the same. Slowly, then, their hands lifted to shoulder-height.

"Fine," their captor said. "Jest hold it——"

They heard a soft scuffle of boots, felt a hand gently relieve them of their guns. The man stepped back.

"Now yuh can get up."

They did so. Jim turned slowly, glancing around to find himself looking into the alert face of the renegade Curly.

"Well?" he said shortly.

"Jest keep yore hands right there," the outlaw grinned. "Yuh kin turn around, though, an' start walkin'. We'll go down to the house first."

Woodenly, they obeyed. After the first paralysing moment, Carver had resigned himself to the inevitable. He had little doubt what it would be. That Candy felt the same way was patent. Jim could sense his boiling anger and indignation in his stiff and jerky manner of moving. Candy was enraged with himself at having been caught so easily. His lips moved and his long face was grey.

Moving into the open, they approached the ranch-house. One of the three men there vented an exclamation at sight of them. The others came rushing out of the house, their guns at the ready.

"Hold it, boys," Curly called out. "It ain't nothin' more serious than company."

Bill Stack put his beefy hands on his hips and stared at Carver as the latter came up.

"Well, well," he said in a chilling tone. "If it ain't Carver an' his pal!" Suddenly he stiffened, whirling to Curly. "Where's the other one——?"

Curly shook his head confidently.

"He couldn't come to our little party," he began coolly. Stack cursed him furiously.

"Damn yuh; this ain't no time for yore jokin'!" he roared. "Did he git away?"

Curly stared at him for a moment in silence. It was then that Carver read the tension gripping this group. It was something that had little to do with himself and Candy. Nothing else could have made Stack explode so unwarningly. Before Jim had time to explore the situation further, Curly drawled:

"Wal, if yuh could'a nailed him, Bill, yore better'n me. Because he didn't show up. There's two broncs tethered back in the brush where I nailed these gents, an' no more——"

Stack had a grip on himself once more.

"Get 'em inside," he growled curtly.

Feeling a gun-muzzle nudge him in the back, Carver made for the door of the Padlock house. Candy still moved

beside him. They stepped inside, and Curly grunted: "Hold on, that'll do fer a minute."

A light was struck. A lamp, found on a shelf, was lit. Carver took particular notice of it because, as near as he knew, the last time it had been handled had been by either Skip Lang or Tex Johnson. There was a little oil in it, but not much; he would have been surprised had there been more. For once he had cause to be thankful for the careless habits of his friends; for sight of the lamp had suddenly given him an idea. He withdrew his glance, wary of having his thoughts read.

Evidently Stack was by no means satisfied that Hunch Wheeler was not somewhere in the neighbourhood. He and the others remained outside for some moments, and when they entered, Jim noted that one of their number had been detailed to keep a watch.

Pausing in the centre of what had been Skip and Tex's kitchen, the outlaw leader glanced about. Jerking a thumb at a couple of ricketty chairs, he growled: "Set 'em down——"

Jim and Candy were shoved into the chairs. Stack placed himself before the former. For a long moment he stared down, and something like implacable hatred flickered behind his unwinking eyes. Then his lips opened.

"Carver," he said bluntly, "yuh got a map."

Jim returned his look quietly. "What if I have?"

"Got it on yuh?"

"No."

Stack's beady eyes narrowed. "But yuh know what's in it, is that it?"

If he expected Jim to deny knowledge of the map, he was disappointed. "Sure I know—and be damned to you, Stack!" was the coolly defiant answer.

Bill grinned wolfishly.

"Wal, yore arm ain't broke," he retorted more easily. "Mebby," and his tone took on a sinister touch of softness, "yuh kin draw that map fer us."

Carver only laughed mirthlessly.

"I could," he admitted. "But why should I?"

Out of the corner of his eye he caught an involuntary movement from Candy. The lanky one was trying to get his attention, to convey some warning. Carver told himself he knew what it was. Candy was provoked at what he con-

sidered pointless defiance; fearing lest Jim's flat challenge bring violence down on them. But Carver had his own object in view in speaking as he did.

Stack turned ugly. Raising a hand unwarningly, he banged Carver alongside the head.

"Just forget that yo're an uppity hombre, Carver," he advised harshly. "It ain't gettin' yuh nowheres with us!" He slammed Jim on the other side. "That's jest a sample. Yuh better do as yo're told if yuh don't want us to go to work on yuh——"

Carver's colour heightened. His gaze grew fixed. But all he said was: "Do your damnedest, Stack!"

Determination, ruthless, flaming, leaped into the outlaw's visage.

"By Gawd, you'll do as yo're told!" he gritted. "Either yuh draw that map, or——"

"Hell," Curly thrust in disgustedly. "This ain't gittin' us nowhere!"

Stack darted him a malignant glare. "Mebby yuh know how to go about this, Brennan!" he flashed.

The latter's lip curled. "What do yuh expect to git out of any map he draws?" he demanded. "Keep at 'im, an' he'll draw one jest to accommodate yuh. But I wouldn't answer fer its' bein' right."

Carver stole a glance at the man. Something about Curly had from the first told him the other was the keenest of the outlaws. Evidently he had his way with Stack most of the time; for it was the latter's belligerence, his overweening ambition, that had made him leader of this gang. He was not clever.

That Stack was capable of giving over when he knew he was in the wrong, he demonstrated now. "Somethin' in that," he grumbled. "But there's still the real map." He transferred his attention to Carver once more.

"Suppose yuh tell us where it is, Carver."

His answer was an infuriating smile.

"Damn yuh!" Stack raged. Plainly he struggled with himself. Jim expected to be knocked out of his chair the next moment; but the blow was delayed. Bill paused, the red devils dancing in his pupils. "It's at yore cabin, ain't it?" he jerked out wickedly.

Carver risked more than Curly Brennan's watchful eye when he shrugged.

"Why should I tell you anything?" he queried.

Stack did not fly into the fury he expected. Instead, the outlaw leader slowly and thoughtfully lit a smoke. There was steel in the glance he lifted to Carver's face.

"Askin' for it, eh?"

"Reckon I don't have to do that, Stack," Jim told him contemptuously. "You'll give it to me anyway——"

Bill's jaw thrust out.

"Right—fer once," he grunted. "There's ways of makin' yore kind talk."

Slowly, almost absently, he advanced the cigarette he had lit towards Carver's face. The latter's answer was a steady stare. Stack said softly:

"A man *can* see with one eye——"

Carver did not twitch a muscle. He sensed Candy gathering his lanky frame in the other chair; was aware that the other outlaws were ready to fling themselves upon the homely one at the very first sign of action.

As the burning coal of the cigarette approached Jim's face so closely that he could feel its heat on his eyeball, Stack cursed harshly. Suddenly, his hand deflected; the stinging cigarette-end was jammed against Jim's cheek. In a flash he knocked Stack's hand away; but the fire stuck, scorching. The next instant, Bill kicked at him furiously; the chair went over backwards; and Carver landed in a heap on the floor.

Even as he gained his feet, there occurred what he had been waiting for. The lamp flickered as the oil in it ran dry. He tossed a glance at it. Smoke was curling up the chimney; another moment or two, and it would expire. Jim was scarcely conscious of the stinging of his cheek as he flung headlong at Stack, lashing out with his fist.

Bill parried the blow awkwardly. So surprised was he that he did not reply at once. Both he and Curly were intent mainly on grabbing Carver. He avoided them, watching warily for the first sign of gun-play, as the lamp flickered again.

"Let's go, Candy!" he rasped.

That Sims was not lacking in readiness was evident in the speed with which he swung into action. Even as he started to rise to his feet, the third outlaw flung his arms around him from behind. It was not unexpected. Candy had set himself. Bending forward sharply, he threw the owlhoot over his head, to land on the floor with a thud.

As if snuffed out by a giant hand, the lamp gave up the ghost at that moment. Carver had stepped back, jamming an elbow into Curly's face and swinging a rocky fist into Stack's knotted visage. Narrowly he averted being swamped. Stack cursed furiously, and Curly bored in. But fighting in the dark was another matter. Carver flung over a cross-right, and felt the shock clear to his shoulder as his fist connected with what must have been somebody's skull. Before he could recover balance, long, steel-bound arms wrapped about him.

For a split-second of time, he thought it was all up with him. Then: "Let go, Candy, you fool! It's me!"

Candy released him suddenly, grumbling: "How in hell was I to know——"

Jim would have hurled sharp words at him, but before he could find them, flame lanced in their direction and the hollow thunder of a gun filled the room. It was the man Candy had thrown to the floor who had fired. But an instant later, a second gun pounded the air in the confined space like a compressed-air hammer. In a twinkling the atmosphere was heavy with strangling fumes.

"Cut the firin'!" a voice bellowed. "Yuh'll only hit one of us!"

It was Curly, the quick-witted, who spoke. Stack was still swearing in a dogged, infuriated tone. It might have covered a few murmured words, but Carver did not trust himself to speech. Instead, he thrust Candy towards the door and followed. He had nearly reached it when he collided with someone. There was no time to determine who it was. Quick as a flash, Jim thrust his foot sidewise, hard. It was a lucky manoeuvre. His feet swept out from under him, the other man fell heavily.

One of the guns thudded again as Candy made the door. Jim was hard on his heels. He felt the deadly flutter of the slug droning past his ear. But he was more concerned with what awaited them outside than with what lay behind.

The man who had been left on guard came running towards them. "Who is it?" he rifled. He got no answer; but their silence told him all that he needed to know. Stopping dead, he fired.

He had reckoned without Candy, however. The lanky one was fully aroused now. Pretending to deplore violence and to fear it, he was a wolf when aroused; and once he let himself go, there were few things he loved more than a rough-

and-tumble brawl. At first glimpse of the man barring their path, he had started directly for the other. He was just beyond arm's-length when the gun exploded, and how he managed to avoid being hit was a mystery. Yet he did. The next instant, he slammed into the man. They went down together; and when Candy rose, it was with the other's gun in his fist.

"Make for the horses!" Jim whipped out. "The rocks'll be cover of a sort——"

On the heels of the words, six-guns began to bark from behind. Curly, Stack and their companion had reached the open. Carver did not waste time for a look over his shoulder. Where before he had been mildly provoked, he was now thankful for the waning moon. Nothing but the deceptive shadows which lay over everything could have saved them from being struck in the lethal gale that buzzed about them.

The next moment, they reached the rocks. Had there been time, they might have found complete concealment. But there was not. Curly threw a single warning shot over his shoulder, and then ran madly. Carver felt a light blow on his shoulder which might have been the whipping back-lash of the brush. But the next he knew, he felt something warm and wet trickling down his ribs. He had been hit.

"Over this way!" Candy exclaimed. "There's the broncs——"

Somehow Jim had got turned around momentarily. But his wound had in no wise impeded his freedom of movement. He had counted on Curly's having overlooked the rifles on their saddles in the tenseness of the capture, unless the man who had stood guard had been reminded of them; and he was right. The sounds of a crashing pursuit by Stack and the others were drawing close as he whipped his Winchester out of the boot. At its warning *spang-g!* these sounds abruptly stopped. Knowledge that the enemy was fully armed had brought the outlaws up short. Jim was not deceived, however. Unless Candy and he took full advantage of this momentary confusion, it would avail them little.

"Hit leather!" he rapped out. "They'll fog us till it's one or the other! There ain't any choice about this!"

Candy waited till he was astride. Then he too swung into the hull. Their horses, alarmed by the firing if not actually frightened, needed no urging. Winning out of the

brush in which they had been concealed, they broke into a mad run.

They had not gone a quarter-mile before, constantly expecting the first indications of a hot pursuit, Carver drew rein so sharply that he was all but thrown. "They're not coming after us, Candy!" he ejaculated. "I've got no intention of trying to get away from them—so far that we don't know what they do next, anyway!"

"Sense in that," Candy admitted, wheeling back. "It's mighty plain thy're jest lettin' us run," added.

Carver wasted no time in indecision. His sharply attuned ear brought him no sound of following horses. They might have been miles from any one, for all the evidence of the enigmatic night. He turned his pony decisively.

"I'm going back," he announced, "and you're going with me."

If Candy thought the proceeding foolhardy, he said nothing. Side by side they jogged back the way they had come, keeping a wary eye peeled.

Still no racket of pursuit assaulted their ears. Five minutes brought them within sight of the lonely Padlock ranch-house, dumped down in the vast expanse of the broken Midnight range. To their chagrin it was utterly deserted.

Candy stared for a moment uncomprehendingly. The outlaws had departed so suddenly and effectively that they might have disappeared in thin air.

"Well, I'll be damned!" the lanky one breathed profane comment on the situation.

CHAPTER XIV

CARVER was chagrined for a moment. "They were too quick for us, Candy," he said.

"Mebby we kin pick 'em up——"

Jim shook his head.

"We can't waste time here. They may be making for the J.C. right now."

"What makes yuh think that?"

"They want that map!"

It was unanswerable, and Candy didn't argue. Kneeing his bronc around, he jammed in the spurs. He and Carver made for the home spread at a fast pace.

The moon had sunk below the horizon now. The world was a ghostly pool of gloom. It failed to slow them up, however. Jim's knowledge of what had happened before only drove him the harder.

They had just topped a ridge overlooking the J.C. ranch buildings when a man thrust out of the trees in their path. It was Hunch. He recognized them, lowering his gun.

"Saw yuh foggin' it this way," he grunted. "What's the trouble?"

They lost no time in acquainting him with what had occurred. "You haven't seen anything of Stack's crowd here?" Carver asked.

"Ain't seen a thing till you showed up," was the answer.

Jim didn't know what to think. "They may be scouting around, trying to locate you," he said finally. "We'll go down to the ranch and wait."

They jogged down there, taking care not to approach the house too closely, lest the women be needlessly disturbed. Gathering in the barn, they waited. Time passed, and nothing happened.

"Shucks," said Candy. "Like as not they made tracks fer the hills——"

Carver was afraid he was right. Yet he would allow no relaxation of vigilance for that reason. His arm, where he had been wounded, was stiffening. He had ascertained, however, that it was nothing serious.

Slowly the night wore away. Not till faint light began to streak the east could they convince themselves that the danger of a second attack was past. Going to the house, Carver built up the kitchen fire and set about breakfast preparations. Before he was well started, however, Mrs. Conroe appeared. She took his task away from him despite his protests.

"Nonsense," she said tartly. "I slep' late this morning, if anything. You go 'long now, and leave things to me."

Carver went out and sank on the doorstep.

Audrey made her appearance a few minutes later. Jim got up as she came to the door. It struck him that she was more beautiful than ever in the fresh , diluted libht of dawn.

The first thing she said when her eyes fell on him was: "You've been shot!"

"It's nothing—I tied a rag around it," he would have passed the matter off. But she would not hear of it.

"You must let me take care of that for you," she insisted.

Grudgingly, he submitted.

She was shorter than he by a head. Making him sit in a chair, she cleansed his wound, which was little more than an angry furrow gouged in the flesh of his chest, and bound it with clean bandages. When it was done, he stood up. She did not step back as he expected her to. For a moment, standing close to him, she met his look with her grave brown eyes.

"You must be careful," she said. He had given her and Mrs. Conroe a sketchy account of the night's events, minimizing their importance. But Audrey was not deceived.

From the first she had been favourably struck by this tall, lithe man, with his strong plain face and unwavering regard. Almost without hre knowledge, she had placed more confidence in him than she would have cared to admit. But that there was more to it than that he read in the very real concern in her soft face. A smile touched his lips.

"I will, Audrey," he murmured.

There might have been more had not the coffee boiled over at that moment. Mrs. Conroe, pretending great busyness around the stove, snatched it off with an exclamation; but as though suddenly struck with self-consciousness, Audrey turned to help her. There was a light flush in her brown cheeks which was not all that of the heat. Mrs. Conroe said:

"Come an' get it, boys!"

Hunch and Candy entered promptly, having evidently been waiting just outside the door. With Carver, they sat down to as tasty a meal as any of them had ever enjoyed. Hunch was loud in his praises, until Mrs. Conroe laughed and said: "Go 'long with you!" and even Carver complimented her on her coffee. As for Candy, he pretended to be put out with all this adulation.

"All dang foolishness," he muttered. "'Course it's good grub; any knothead could tell yuh that. But it's only spoilin' us."

Hunch laughed: "Yo're thinkin' of the time we'll have to go back to yore cookin'. Dunno but yo're right at that."

Candy muttered something into his cup, giving him a furious look. Carver smiled at his foibles. He never ex-

pected to see the time when Candy overcame his shyness in the presence of women, which he covered by a show of gruffness.

After breakfast, the three men moved out into the yard. Hunch caught himself yawning and stretching. "Got a mind to go crawl in the hay," he observed. "Seems like a week since I had a little shut-eye."

"Good idea," Jim nodded. "We'll all nap for an hour."

Going to the barn, they spread blankets and made themselves comfortable. In setting an hour for the limit of their sleep, however, Carver reckoned without nature. It was midday and the sun stood almost straight overhead when he awoke. Hunch and Candy were sprawled out still, dead to the world. He started to awaken them, thought better of it, and instead moved out of the barn.

Audrey Harkness was in the yard. Seeing him, she came forward at once.

"I thought you were resting," she said. "I refused to allow you to be disturbed——"

He caught at that.

"Somebody here looking for me?" he asked. Even before she spoke, he knew that his guess had been right.

"It was Sheriff Lanning," she informed him. "He came to inquire concerning the raid on the ranch the other night—evidently you didn't tell him about it. Thinking you had your own reasons for that, I told him that it was unimportant——"

A frown knit his brows.

"I don't understand," he said. "I didn't tell him, and that's a fact—it was because I forgot. Who did tell him?"

"I believe it was Mr. Strange," she answered. He was even more surprised.

"Strange! Do you mean to tell me he admitted——"

"Not at all," she interposed. "I was struck by the circumstance myself, and made inquiry. It seems that Mr. Strange 'got wind' of the affair, and far from knowing anything concerning it himself, was asking the sheriff for information."

Carver rubbed his ear, rolling it over. "He 'got wind' of it, did he?"

"He told Mr. Lanning the story was common gossip," she nodded. "Either he pretended to be, or actually was, trying to learn whether there was anything in it."

"I see."

But Carver didn't see. Far as it was from being the first time he had caught Jared Strange in a position readily lending itself to suspicion, he was no closer than ever to pinning the man down with a single damning fact.

"What did Lanning have to say?" he asked.

The lawman had contented himself with half a dozen questions. In view of the girl's participation in the occurrence he was investigating, her answers had satisfied him.

"I mentioned nothing about last night," she added.

"That's good. Not that it matters greatly," Carver added; "but I don't want him too interested in our affairs. When we've got something definite, will be time enough to call him in. Heck Lanning isn't crooked. He's just slow."

He returned thoughtfully to the barn and routed out his friends.

"Now what?" Candy inquired, coming back from dousing his head in the creek. Jim said:

"I've been doing some thinking about last night, Candy. You see we were dead right about Stack's bunch. They have a definite interest in the old Padlock. I've been wondering it——" He broke off.

"If that cache is some'eres over there?" the lanky one completed. "By gravy, yuh may be right at that! That's where Reb Battle was holed up, shore's shootin'—if he's the one who planted the cache. . . . But I don't remember no rock over there anywheres that looks like a hoss."

"Nor I either," Jim confessed. "All the same, I'm convinced they were searching for it. You remember they were wandering around the yard at first, last night. Of course, without the map they have no clue as to where to look."

"Why not push over there in daylight fer a look around?" Candy demanded.

"That was in my mind," Carver nodded. "Of course we run the risk of unintentionally tipping them off to something if they have a man spying on us. They'd know we wouldn't be looking in a place where the map would make a cache impossible. But——"

"If we come anywheres near findin' it ourselves," Candy inserted, "there won't be much left by the time they come ag'in!"

"Exactly."

While Hunch and Candy got up the ponies, Carver returned to the house. More than ever, these days, the map of the cache weighed on his mind. Going to its place of concealment, he fished it out and took it to Audrey.

She looked at the torn envelope he laid in her hand without attempting to open it. "What is this?"

"That's the cause of all the trouble, ma'am."

"You called me Audrey before," she flashed. It effectively dispelled any doubt he might have had that she had noticed his use of the name. He flushed under the tan.

"Why do you give it to me, Jim?" she asked.

He told her where he had had it concealed. "I'm afraid they may take a notion to burn the place some time—and I want the map for evidence, if it should ever prove necessary. . . . I thought of asking you to keep it for me."

"At least it is sensible of you not to carry it on your own person," she agreed. She hesitated then. "You are not giving this to me to make sure that I will personally be more careful of myself?"

He disclaimed any such intention. "Naturally I'd expect you to be careful," he admitted. "But no matter what happened, the map would be safer with you than anywhere else. Those men would never lay hands on you with the idea of making a search—and besides, it would never occur to them that you might have it on you."

"I think you are right, as usual," she acknowledged. "I will keep it for you, Jim."

Candy and Hunch were waiting when he reached the yard. Swinging into the saddle, they struck away from the ranch after splashing across the Stepping Stone. On the first ridge, however, Carver drew up. They read what was in his mind.

"Hell, Jim," Hunch began protestingly. "There ain't no danger in broad daylight! I'll git lockjaw, or somethin', stayin' in one place so long," he declared earnestly.

Candy smiled tolerantly. "Okay, Hunchie," he said in a condescending tone at which his brother puncher took instant offence. "I'll take up where yuh left off—go 'long, an' lemme loaf a while."

"Yuh don't have to be so dang nasty about it!" Hunch hurled at him, starting to shove his bronc close to the other. Carver caught his bridle, suppressing a chuckle.

"Okay, let it go," he advised. "I reckon for this once it won't hurt if we all pull away for a couple of hours."

Candy did not wait to be invited a second time, and curiously enough, this solution of the business appeared to restore the disgruntled one to his wonted serenity, although he and Candy continued to rasp each other with barbed levity.

They were soon on Midnight Creek. Carver said they would split up and spread. "We don't have to go at this as though we were hunting for anything," he reminded. "But keep your eye peeled for a boulder that reminds you, even vaguely, of a bronc's head. And work in towards the ranch."

Each taking a separate way, they struck off through the depressions, carpeted with short, curly buffalo and grama grass, which made up the range. Carver watched no more vigilantly for the rock they sought than he did for a possible watcher in the hills. But he saw neither, and when he finally joined his partners, it was plain they had had no better luck than he.

"Danged if I ain't stared every rock plum in the face fer two miles," Candy growled disgustedly. "Either I'm blind or they jest ain't no stone hoss around here."

Hunch reported much the same, and in similar language. Carver shook his head.

"I can't figure it out," he admitted. "It must be because we've unconsciously formed some sort of image we're looking for, and we pass right over the real thing."

"Wal, yuh gotta know what yo're lookin' fer before yuh kin hunt, ain't yuh?" Candy demanded crustily.

"I suppose that's true enough——" Carver made no attempt to argue the matter.

They had been talking near the Padlock ranch-house. Gazing at it, it came back to them as it always would, that Skip and Tex had called this home. Carver dismounted and walked over to sit on the steps.

"There's no question the old place has buried many a secret," he mused. "But in a way, I wish either we or the owlhoots would locate that cache. We'd have at least that over with."

"What yuh mean, either them or us?" Hunch caught him up. "Got the inside track, ain't we? If we don't beat 'em to it, it'll be our own fault."

Carver perceived that the blank wall against which this pair had been butting their heads had begun at length to get under their skin. Without saying anything, he got up and stepped inside to look around. As a matter of fact, he didn't know why he did it. He was searching for ideas.

The others followed him a moment later. They moved about the rooms thoughtlessly, glancing here and there. Carver saw Candy suddenly freeze and stare. Following the direction of the other's gaze, he caught what he thought was the reflection of light on a bottle or tin can which had fallen and rolled under the edge of a bunk.

If the lanky one thought the same, however, he didn't let it go at that. Getting down on all fours, he reached under. A grunt escaped him. He gained his feet with considerable more alacrity than he had used in getting down. Carver caught the dull gleam of something in his hand.

"What is it?" he queried.

Candy turned to him. He held his palm out. On it lay a battered gold watch. The crystal was broken, and it had stopped. But it had been a good time-piece in its day. Taking it in his hands, Carver saw that the filigree work around its edges and on the back was worn almost off. Then he paused. There was a scroll on the back, and in its centre had been engraved a flowing monogram.

Candy bent his head to study it with him. They made it out at almost the same moment. That it meant much to both was plain as they lifted startled eyes and stared at each other.

The half-obliterated, Spencerian monogram on the watch's back-plate formed the initials J.H.

CHAPTER XV

"YUH reckon this is Harkness's watch?" Candy broke the silence at last.

"I don't think there can be any doubt of it." Carver sounded positive. "Audrey can tell us for sure, though."

Candy scratched his grizzled hair, his hat tilted sidewise. "Dang queer!" he said explosively. And after a moment: "But mebby it ain't at that." He was reconstructing events.

"Stack was carryin' it, likely. We throwed him around considerable in here. It dropped out of his pocket, an' he never knowed where he lost it." He looked up triumphantly.

Carver nodded absently, his thoughts elsewhere.

"This certainly settles the question of where Harkness disappeared to," he said. "When you come to think of it, we've been taking a lot for granted in this case. A lot of it is bound to be guess-work, of course. But we're slowly and surely piecing it together."

Hunch came in from the other room and they told him about the watch. His eyes widened.

"We better look around here good," he said. He began to canvass the floor with care.

"You won't find anything else," Carver told him. It did not prevent his helping with the search, however. As he said, they found nothing further.

"Candy's right," Hunch declared at length. "Stack was carryin' the watch, an' he lost it in the scramble."

If Carver agreed, he said nothing. Stepping outside, they mounted and worked up through the hills. They were seeking the sign of Stack and his crowd, hoping against hope that they could trace the outlaws to their hide-out. Considering the speed with which they had departed during the early hours of the morning, there was every chance that they had used less care than usual in covering their trail. But as always, it disappeared in the rocky gullies.

Candy shook his head dolefully.

"It's like huntin' fer a needle in a haystack," he grumbled. "They know our game, an' they're blockin' us at every turn."

"An' it won't be long," Hunch threw in forebodingly, "before they try the same game on us that worked with Skip an' Tex."

They turned back as the sun began to arch downward. On reaching his ranch, Carver went at once to the house.

"Audrey, do you recognize this?" he asked the girl, showing her the watch.

A startled exclamation broke from her lips.

"Why, that's Father's watch! . . . Where did you find it?"

Jim acquainted her with the circumstance of its discovery. She followed closely, and he watched the blood drain out of her face. At the end, she began impulsively:

"You don't think this means that——" She broke off there, unable to continue.

"That your father's been killed?" he completed for her. He shook a definite negative. "We know they've taken practically every cent he had in the world. Why shouldn't they take his watch?"

"But a personal possession like this——" Dread made her voice tight and small.

"Don't think about it," he advised her quickly. "I'm sure Harkness is alive. I don't know why, but as Hunch would say, I can feel it. Our only danger," he added soberly, "will lie in taking too long to find him. If they see us beginning to work nearer and nearer their hiding-place, they might——" He stopped. "It's why I haven't taken to riding the hills blind, since I learned your father was being held there."

"But we must do everything we can," she pleaded. "I'd never forgive myself if—if he were not to be found. If you are right, and time is the essence of his safety, then we mustn't waste a second!"

He nodded unwillingly. "I'm trying not to——"

"I don't mean to criticize," she assured him hastily. "You are doing splendidly, Jim, to have learned as much as you have. Oh—I don't know what I'm saying," she interrupted herself distractedly. "I wish I could do something! There hasn't been a minute since I came that worry hasn't been tearing at me."

Her urgency got to him powerfully. It came to him with a shock that there was nothing he would not do for this girl. He felt curiously impotent, as though he had been somehow remiss. Yet he knew he had done all a man could. He was prepared to go on as he had been doing.

"You've been fine, Audrey," he said in a low tone. "Don't get discouraged. There's every hope that we'll find Harkness in time. It's true I haven't had much to offer so far; but a man never gets ahead so fast as when he's working in the dark."

Placing her hands on his arm, she bent her head till it rested on his shoulder. "I know, Jim," she whispered. "I have perfect faith in you. Don't mind what I say. I will be all right in a minute or two."

Astonishment turned him to stone. Struck dumb for the moment by her nearness, he could only look down at her bowed

head. A tremor shook him inwardly. The charm of her person went to his senses like wine; the impulse was overpowering to take her into his arms and comfort her. But he realized how instinctive her gesture had been. He tried to tell himself she was not thinking of him at all.

When she lifted her eyes to look at him, a light in them which he dared not attempt to interpret, it was almost his undoing. He stepped back, and the moment was past.

"I will do better from now on," she smiled.

It was trembling on his lips to tell her how much she meant to him, when Mrs. Conroe entered the room. Their presence surprised her and she stopped, too late.

"Excuse me!" she exclaimed. "I didn't know—— That is, I decided it was about time to start supper."

Gazing at her, Carver wondered how much of her confusion was deliberate. He felt the blood rushing to his neck and ears furiously, and Audrey turned away with a self-possessed laugh.

"It is growing late," she said. "Run along, Jim, and leave us to ourselves for half an hour."

Turning towards the door, he paused long enough to shoot her a quizzical glance. Whatever the result of his talk with her, it could not be denied that she had got hold of herself once more. She appeared more at peace than at any time since her coming here. The significance of the fact escaped him entirely.

A thoroughly satisfactory supper put even Hunch and Candy in excellent spirits again. Retiring once more to the yard, the three men built smokes and, arms hooked over the corral poles, discussed the situation.

"Aimin' to do anythin' to-night?" Candy asked Jim.

The latter hesitated before shaking his head. "No," he said; "we'll put in the night here at the spread." But, conscious of the active hatred of Stack and his men, he did not propose to relax his guard in any way.

"We'll take shifts of keepin' a watch from the hills," he decided. "Candy, you can take it till eleven o'clock; I'll do my trick between then and two o'clock or so, and Hunch can finish out till dawn."

It was okay with them. Shortly after dark, Jim and Hunch retired to the barn. Candy called Carver towards midnight; and he spent an uneventful three hours in the saddle, jogging the circuit of the ranch as he had done many a time

on night guard, but protected by the cover of the wooded ridges. Once he sat for twenty minutes on a rock overlooking the Stepping Stone, listening to the sleepy gurgle of the stream and watching the slow-wheeling stars. He called Hunch to his vigil some time after three, and returned to the hay. Morning found him ravenous, and ready for a hard day.

He had determined that it would be that for him. "I'm going into the hills—alone," he said, in answer to Candy's question at the breakfast table. "There won't be any argument about who'll watch the place, because you'll both be doing it."

Candy pricked up his ears. "Yuh reckon somethin' is liable to happen?"

"I don't know. But it's as likely to happen here as anywhere."

Hunch rode in as he finished eating. He was informed of the day's programme. That he had little liking for the idea of being left behind was patent, but Jim was adamant.

Carver's distinct impression, as he jogged away a few minutes later, was of Audrey watching his departure from the kitchen door. For a mile the thought of her remained with him. He could not escape the knowledge that she had brought something into his life which had not been there before. Just what it was, or what it would mean for him in future, he avoided asking himself.

"No reason why she should take a permanent shine to me," he argued silently. "She belongs in the East, and she'll probably go back there. Not but what she's as good or better than some of the girls around here. But if she thinks she likes me now, it's because I'm doing everything I can to help locate her dad. Once he's found, she'll forget about me."

It occurred to him that he was perhaps being unjust. He drew up on a ridge above the Padlock ranch and strove to thrust from his mind these persistent considerations which were so foreign to what should occupy him to-day. He had no signal success, and he was still sitting there, when there sounded a crashing in the brush at one side and he whirled to see Audrey break from the trees and shove her pony forward. He had seen her astride a horse before, but again he noted her free, lithe carriage and sure command of her mount. She gave him an apologetic smile as she came up.

"It's hardly the right thing for you to be riding away from the ranch very far without one of the boys being along."

he told her, trying to convey a warning while at the same time respecting her independence of action.

"That was my own thought," she said easily. "So I hurried to overtake you."

The twinkle in his eye acknowledged her quickness of wit. "I'm afraid you won't be able to stay with me to-day," he said decidedly. "I plan to be gone all day certainly, and maybe even to-night——"

"I am perfectly able to take care of myself," she declared firmly.

He gazed at her in perplexity. "But I——"

"Jim," she pleaded, changing suddenly; "take me with you. I know where you are going! If there is the slightest chance of locating Father at once, I want to be there!"

He looked at her thoughtfully for a moment, but did not explain that if he wanted any one along at all, it would have been one of the punchers. He understood her point of view, of course. And after all, he had no certain knowledge that he might get farther or learn more if she was not with him.

"If you're sure you can keep up with me, all right," he capitulated, amazed at his own words. For, once they were spoken, the folly of the business was doubly apparent. He meant to invade the stronghold of the renegades, where little respect and less safety awaited women of any kind, and Audrey in particular. On the other hand, there was the anticipated pleasure of her company, exerting a powerful tug which he was not self-deceptive enough to overlook.

Her prompt answer, "I knew you would take me," demolished his reluctance completely.

It was a warm, bright, blue-and-gold morning. A touch of fall in the air nights had flecked the foliage of brush and willows with russet. Before them the bold peaks and headlands of the Tetons stood up in magnified dignity, the folds and creases of rocky canyons scarring the slopes.

"This is perfectly glorious," Audrey exclaimed, gazing at it, her eyes bright and her cheeks flushed. "I could love your country, Jim."

As for him, he was not deceived by its appearance of peace and serenity. He tightened up as they reached the first of the rising slopes.

"Don't be surprised, no matter where I take you," he told her. "Whatever you do, stick close to me. If the

going gets rough, let the bronc have its head and just hang on."

"But where *are* we going?" she questioned.

"I am following your suggestion," he confessed. "We'll try to pick up some direct clue to the place where your father is being held. I don't need to warn you of how much care we must use."

"No," she said, sobering. "Perhaps my coming was a mistake after all——"

"You're here now. We'll go on."

They climbed steadily during the morning. At one point or another, where the little valleys opened out, or a widening canyon afforded opportunity, Carver cautiously reconnoitred the ground. He found old sign more than once, and watching his every move, and asking an occasional brief question, Audrey learned something of the art of trail reading, as utterly foreign to the world from which she had come as the etiquette of a society reception would have been to Jim.

Each time the old tracks faded out after a few hundred yards. In some cases it had been broken deliberately; in others, rain had effaced the trail.

"At least this shows that men have been here," Audrey observed acutely. He nodded, scarcely thinking it worth while to add that so wide and vague a choice might include Skip Lang and Tex Johnson, Sheriff Lanning, or any number of other men. What he wanted was to cut a recently made track.

Some time after noon, Audrey surprised him by displaying a lunch which she had packed in her saddle-bags. They ate in a shady grove of spruce, the resinous odour of the conifers lending a pleasant tang to the meal and the leaping silver thread of a brook nearby supplying them with white wine. Carver had relieved the horses of their saddles for a twenty-minute rest, and was throwing the saddles on once more and cinching up, when he froze abruptly to stare across his pony's back towards a high wooded butte half a mile away, with the higher mountains rising sheer at its back.

Audrey noted his action. "What do you see?" she asked. Without shifting gaze, he pointed. A thrill leapt in the girl as she descried a distant horseman crossing an open patch on the butte's shoulder. A few minutes, and he would disappear behind it.

"Who is it?" Audrey murmured tensely.

"Don't know," Carver grunted as he twitched the cinch tight. "But I aim to find out right sudden!"

They were in the saddle in a twinkling. For once Jim left her to her own devices, striking in the spurs and racing towards the base of the butte at the best pace he could manage over the uneven ground. She made a creditable attempt to keep up, but gradually she dropped back. She arrested her impulse to call out to him, however. Seeing him making for the far side of the butte, she changed direction and headed around the near side, her quickened thoughts busy with what she would do if it was she who ran into the strange rider.

Behind the butte she encountered difficulties in the form of down-timber and tumbled boulders. Somehow she fought her way through, or around. Half an hour later, hot and dishevelled, at the sudden crack of pony hoofs on rock, she looked up to see Carver coming towards her. His face was a study.

"You saw no one at all?" he rifled at her. Audrey shook her head. "Funny!" he grunted. "That gent never saw us at all; and yet, he has disappeared completely. I can't figure it out."

They turned back the way he had come, riding slowly and scrutinizing the washes gashing the butte's flank. There was nothing to be seen, and they were soon back where they had started from. Carver was about to give up in disgust when, jogging past the mouth of a side-canyon running down from the heights, he suddenly drew in with a jerk. A man was riding unconcernedly towards them, oblivious of their presence. He saw them a moment later, however, and after a momentary start of surprise, came on, a wooden smile wreathing his lips if not his eyes.

It was Jared Strange.

CHAPTER XVI

THE two men eyed each other warily. There was a sternness touching Carver's face which did not relax at the suave tone Strange used when he spoke.

"It's you, Carver?" he said. "You gave me a start for a moment——"

"I've been wanting to talk to you," Jim returned quietly. "I didn't expect to meet you here, or perhaps I should say in just this way."

Strange's eyes narrowed slightly at his choice of words. If he found an unwelcome significance in it, he chose to pass it over. Removing his hat, he greeted Audrey pleasantly. Any coolness there may have been in her response he ignored as well, turning back to Jim.

"You wanted to see me, you say?"

Carver nodded. "It's about that little affair that occurred at my place the other night."

Neither by word nor sign did Strange betray the fact, if the words meant anything to him.

He said: "Ah. The—raid, you refer to? I see. Lanning tells me——"

"The way I got it," Carver cut him off, sharpness shading his talk, "was that you told him, Strange. I've been wondering where you got it." He added pointedly: "As it happens, none of us told any one about it."

"Lanning mentioned that fact to me," the other nodded with every appearance of frankness. "It *does* seem odd. Did you have any special reason for keeping the facts to yourself?" he concluded with elaborate carelessness.

Carver flushed.

"That is neither here nor there," he retorted curtly. "It can't concern any one if I had. The point is, that an unprovoked assault was made on my ranch, and violence offered Miss Harkness. Then I learn that you told the sheriff all about it. Where did you get your information?"

It was putting the question with a vengeance, and Strange acknowledged the fact with an expression of pained surprise.

"My dear fellow," he protested with a nice mixture of amusement and indignation. "Are you trying to tell me that I had something to do with the affair?"

Jim's smile was hard, mirthless.

"I don't have to tell you, Strange," he declared flatly. "I'm convinced you could tell me a few things, for that matter." His irony dropped away, and deadly earnestness flashed through. "I asked you where your information came from, and I propose to have an answer."

Strange simulated a satirical credulity, widening his eyes and turning them humorously towards Audrey. "Don't tell me that you feel the same way about this, Miss Harkness?"

She said dryly: "You can surely answer Mr. Carver's plain question at no cost to yourself."

"It's like that, eh?" He apparently decided to humour

Jim. "If you're curious, Carver, I picked the story out of some saloon gossip in Medicine Dance. It was precisely because I wanted to learn more—knowing the daughter of my friend Harkness was staying at your place—that I was persuaded to go to Lanning at all."

"Just what was the name of this gent who knew so much?" Jim insisted.

"Really, I couldn't say——" Strange spoke dryly, shrugging at the end as if to close the subject. Carver was studying every line of his face with care.

"You're sure you don't know him?"

"Quite."

If it was a challenge, Jim displayed no hesitancy about picking it up. He stared at Strange for a long moment, and when he spoke it was in a tone of undisguised and contemptuous hostility.

"Strange," he said deliberately, "you're lying."

The other glared at him while the blood drained away from his face, leaving it a mask of hatred. He had a magnificent control of himself.

"Be careful of your words, Carver," he warned thinly.

"I never was more careful," Jim tossed back. "You lied to Heck Lanning, and you're lying to me now. I think you know plenty about what happened at my place!"

Strange threw out a hand, half in disgust. He turned to Audrey again.

"How can he be reasoned with?" he demanded. "He admits himself that you were there at the time, Miss Harkness. Haven't you told him you didn't see me there?"

The girl gazed at him levelly without troubling to reply. It was Jim who gave him his answer.

"My opinion of you has already told me that you'd see to that, Strange. You'd be mighty careful that she didn't see you. Bill Stack would do quite as well as yourself—or so you thought, until he failed to turn up with what you were hunting for!"

Strtnge turned suddenly ugly. "You will persist in your course, Carver!" he grated. "There's nothing left for me to do but——" Abruptly he rammed his spurs home, jumping his mount directly at Carver. He had no gun on his saddle, nor was there one visible on his hip; but he still held his hat in his hand. Sweeping close, he tried to dash it into Jim's face to blind and daze him.

Another might have been caught unawares, but not Jim. He pivoted his bronc so that the two horses came together almost side by side. For a moment, he and Strange were close together. He caught the man's wrist with a lightning snatch, and yanked him forward.

"Two can play at that game, Strange," he grunted. Without warning, his other arm lashed out, his hand balled into a fist. The blow caught Strange alongside of the jaw. On the instant, Jim let go his grip. The Easterner toppled out of the saddle as if struck by a battering-ram. He landed with a thud that shook him to the teeth.

For a moment, then, Jim had his hands full with the two horses. A kick designed to shunt Strange's mount out of the way only missed fire. His own bronc danced nervously.

"Look out, Jim!" Audrey cried. "He's got a gun!" She tried frantically to pull the rifle out of the boot under her saddle, her very haste frustrating her efforts.

Jim started to swing to the ground on the off side, then desisted, since it would only afford Strange exactly the opportunity he craved. Instead, yanking the other man's pony close, he left the saddle to plunge over its back in a long dive. Strange saw him coming and let out a bellow of fury. Too late he tried to lift the gun he had whipped from his pocket. Jim struck him squarely, with all the weight of his one hundred and sixty pounds.

Strange was bowled over, rolling. His gun flew from his hand. He rose with a snarl on his lips, but Jim was before him. They came together toe to toe.

Strange cut loose with a terrific right that grazed Jim's head and set his ears ringing. He countered with a short-arm jolt that fetched a grunt. Crossing with his left, he had the satisfaction of seeing Strange reel. But the man was game. He caught his balance and bored in. There was murder in his twisted visage. Jim was as determined. The barriers were down, and he knew Strange would have no mercy on him.

Rushing in, the latter levelled a blow at him that would have felled a bullock. He ducked under it. Wrapping his long arms around Strange's middle, he lifted the man and would have hurled him to the ground with a violence to shake him loose from his senses. But Strange twisted in his grasp. The next instant, his legs and then his arms were twined about Jim's body. Staggering with the unexpected shift of weight,

Jim lost balance and they went down. This time there was no attempt to tear apart. Strange was like a mad cougar, gouging and clawing in the frenzied effort to get at a vital spot.

With a tremendous effort, Jim managed to roll over. His antagonist did the same, and they fetched up against a rock with Jim still underneath. A corner of the rock had struck him in the back. Momentarily at least, his spine appeared to have snapped. His arms went numb and he felt the strength leaving his muscles.

Strange appeared to sense his advantage. Making a lightning shift, he fastened his two hands on Jim's throat. Jim felt his windpipe closed with a relentless pressure. For a moment it didn't matter; it was fright that rose in him like an overwhelming wave, and which he fought back. But the next instant, his labouring lungs cried for oxygen. The need of it seared through him like a knife. Under Strange's dilated, exulting stare his tongue protruded and his face began to grow black.

It was then that Audrey ran in, her rifle clubbed. She did not dare shoot, distrusting her aim and the steadiness of her hands. But that she meant to fight Strange off of his victim was plain. A tentative swing of the gun-stock missed as the man lurched aside. Quickly she recovered and aimed a harder blow at his arms.

"Get out of here, you hell-cat!" he screamed at her in a fury. His glare was implacable. Had she given her personal safety a thought, she might well have shrunk before it; but all her concern was for Jim.

The rifle struck Strange on the forearm, nearly breaking the bone. He let go with a howl. Sensing a change which his flickering senses could not encompass, Jim made a supreme effort to free himself. He succeeded in tearing away from his enemy. Audrey making another swing with the rifle at that moment, Jim completed Strange's rout by rolling over sharply. The latter tumbled off; but for several seconds Jim was conscious of nothing save the sweet air rushing into his tortured lungs. His heart thudded like a trip-hammer. Then as his strength flowed back, he struggled up.

He was in time to see Strange grapple fiercely with Audrey. Holding the rifle's barrel as she did, she had been unable to turn it in time to fire, although from the look of

desperation in her face Jim read that she would have. Bounding to his feet, he rushed forward.

"Damn you, I'll fix you for good and all!" Strange roared at the girl.

The next instant, he was seized as though by a giant hand and flung half a dozen yards. He piled up against a rock. Jim was on him before he could gain his feet. A smashing blow caught him in the mouth and down he went again. A second time he strove to struggle up; but Jim had been transformed into a raging whirlwind. Once more he stretched Strange at full length. The Easterner started to get up, paused, groaning, and sank back.

"Get on your hocks!" Jim blazed.

"I—I'm licked, Carver!" There was a note of desperation in Strange's cracked voice. "I can't move!" Even as he said it, he made a still greater effort to rise. It was fruitless. Half-way to his knees, he collapsed and fell back.

Even in that moment, Jim accorded him the tribute of acknowledging his nerve. Strange had withstood as terrific punishment as himself, and perhaps worse; yet there wasn't a fleck of yellow in him. He wanted so badly to fight on that tears of rage squeezed out of his eyes and his supporting arm trembled violently.

"God!" he gasped. "If I could only get on my feet——!"

Jim hauled him up and stepped back quickly. A flicker of savage hope crossed Strange's visage as he half-staggered towards him. It was all he could do to get his arms up as high as his shoulders. Jim stepped in, and planted a final blow alongside the man's jaw. With a cry, Strange spun around and dropped. He was washed up.

Jim turned to the girl. His eyes widened at the high flush which had mounted to her face; the snapping sparkle in her pupils like small torches of aroused defiance and joy. It came to him as something of a shock that this fight had not sickened her in the slightest. On the contrary, she had enjoyed it.

She was staring down at Strange as if she loathed him with an unutterable intensity.

"He got just what he deserved," she exclaimed warmly. "Throwing a gun on us like that!" She broke off, and her tone changed. "I was afraid he would choke you to death, Jim, after he stunned you against that rock——"

Whatever Jim had been about to reply, the words were never spoken. As they stood there, both were shaken to sudden awareness by the echoing crash of a rifle. That it had been aimed at themselves there could be no doubt. The slug slashed brush and screamed off a rock not three feet from Jim's side. Whoever he was, the marksman was distant. But a second shot followed almost immediately.

Jim forgot himself in his instant concern for Audrey. "Get to your horse!" he cried. "That gent don't give a damn who he hits!"

She showed herself as efficient as he, swinging astride her mount with a single graceful leap. He was not far behind her. Another rifle sent the cracking echoes across the hills before they had time to get the horses started. A third set up its wicked pound; slugs rattled about the spot like hail.

"Are you hit?" Jim exclaimed, seeing th girl flinch. She turned a startled, undeniably frightened face to him.

"No, I'm all right." Her voice sounded plucky. "A bullet must have touched my hair; it st-startled me——"

Waiting for no more, he kicked her pony into motion. As he did so, he wheeled towards the right. That way lay the open land surrounding the butte. But another second brought him the spiteful pound of firearms from that direction. He turned back.

"Which way can we go?" Audrey asked swiftly. "They have us surrounded!"

It was his own thought. But he strove to mask his sinking heart with an appearance of decision.

"Into the canyon!" he ordered sharply. "That's it—the one Strange came down! Hurry!"

They raced the ponies for the cover of the rocky portal. Even before they reached it, a glance flung over his shoulder showed Jim their attackers, converging on every hand. He made out Curly Brennan, his intent face plain above the sights of his rifle; and a slug struck high on the rocky wall of the canyon to buzz away.

"Mighty poor shooting—that," he reflected, without giving the matter much thought.

Poor or good, it scarcely abated as they raced on up the narrow canyon. The walls pinched in, high and unscalable at this point, in a manner which would have been alarming to Jim had he not been assured that Strange had come this way only a little while since. Then a new thought struck him.

What if Strange had been exploring the crevasse, only to find it impassable?

He strove to thrust the thought from him, turning in the saddle to throw a warning shot towards the rear. The renegades were pressing after at top speed. Already Jim could see two or three of them. Then he saw Audrey, a few rods in the lead, beginning to slacken pace.

"I'm afraid the walls are pinching together, Jim!" she exclaimed. "We can't get a horse through there. . . . It looks like we're trapped!"

Fortunately, rocks cluttered the floor of the canyon, some of them good-sized. "Get behind that cover," Jim waved her towards them imperiously. "We'll hold them off while we take time for a look around!"

She did as he said. Scarcely had she disappeared, when a bullet droned off the boulder behind which she had found refuge. Jim was taking cover near at hand. Hopeful as he chose to sound, he had little doubt that they were cornered with a vengeance, and that their trail might well end here. The thought that remained with him most vividly was not that, in all probability, Audrey had the mysterious map of the cache somewhere about her even now, but that it had been he who had led her into this impasse.

CHAPTER XVII

THE canyon into which Carver and Audrey had been driven was a narrow vent gashing the flank of Slide Mountain. Springing or crawling from boulder to boulder, Jim threw anxious glances up the rocky waste. Slide's bald crown was hidden from his sight, nearly a thousand feet above; crags and precipices overhung the gorge. He would have said it was impossible for a man to climb more than a few hundred feet that way.

There was no time to prospect the situation with any thoroughness, however. Stack's gang was crowding in on them. Guns crashed and harsh yells echoed from the sheer walls as the outlaws called directions to one another.

Slugs began to scream off the boulders and granite dykes near at hand, leaving grey smears of lead. Jim saw Audrey

working the lever of her rifle and seeking a glimpse of the open canyon between the rocks.

"Stay back," he exclaimed sharply. "You're as liable to get hit as a man——"

"I can use a rifle, Jim," she told him stoutly. "There's absolutely no sense in babying me!"

He knew that an expression of his fears for her safety would have no effect on her now. Her blood was up; even while his apprehensions were at their keenest, he knew pride in her courage. If she wished in vain that she were a man for an hour, it could not prevent her from acting like one.

"Do as I say!" he threw at her. "I can't have you on my hands with a bullet hole in you!"

Whether she took the words at face value or not, they sobered her. "I will be careful," she murmured.

He tossed her a box of cartridges. "Load that rifle to the muzzle and hold it ready——"

Their attackers were working steadily nearer. The crash of their guns made the narrow defile echo. Jim could hear an occasional rasp as a boot slipped on rock. He had found a crevice between two boulders, and while it did not afford as full a view as he could have wished, he was able to watch a large portion of the lower canyon. Once he spotted something that looked like a man's hat above a low rock. Throwing up his rifle, he fired quickly. The object disappeared abruptly, and there was a yell.

Carver ducked and lay motionless as a rain of slugs rattled over his head. He grinned at Audrey with intent to keep her spirits up. Bloodless as her face was, she responded.

Changing position, Carver peeped out again. He was in time to see Bill Stack leap from behind a rock and make for a dyke half a dozen yards away. Whipping up his rifle, he fired. He was too late for a direct hit, but he saw the outlaw leader plunge for cover in a long dive.

Stack raised his bull voice a moment later. "Carver!" he called. Jim made no response. Bill tried again, to trail off in a string of curses. "Might's well give yoreself up, Carver!" he cried. "We got yuh cornered—yuh can't git away! Throw down yore guns an' step out here in the open, an' we'll give yuh a chance!"

Catching Audrey's inquiring look, Jim shook his head. "He'd shoot us down in a second," he muttered.

"Are yuh comin', Carver?" Stack bellowed.

"When I do, it won't be with my hands in the air, Stack!" Jim tossed back contemptuously.

Bill's profanity rose to a pitch of frenzy. "Smoke 'em out!" he roared to his men. "One way or another, we'll finish this in our own style!"

The guns, which had fallen silent for a few seconds, set up their clamour again. A blue haze lay over the canyon which rose slowly in layers.

Emptying his rifle, Jim tossed it to Audrey and received the other in exchange. He did not feel safe in remaining in one spot for more than a minute or two. Each time he fired the renegades soon spotted his position. They strove by direct fire, by ricochet, and by every trick in the bag to dislodge if not disable him. It was not long before blood was trickling down his forehead from a cut made by a flying splinter of rock, and his shirt was torn in more than one place. He only fought the harder, aware that slowly but surely the enemy was closing in—that before long something would have to be done.

His thoughts, as he saw how things were going, were far from pleasant. More than ever now, he condemned himself for allowing Audrey to become involved in this dangerous game. He should have thrust pity aside in the first place, insisting that she remain in Medicine Dance. Scarcely able to tell how it had come about, step by step he had led her closer to the brink; until she stood in a fair way to share his own fate, if not that of her father.

A glance at his grey face told the girl something of his grim thoughts.

"You are accusing yourself now—needlessly," she whispered. "We are in this together, Jim. If you must go through with it for my sake, I prefer being here to anything else."

"That's just talk," he muttered, tight-lipped. "If I ever get you out of this, I won't land you in the same fix a second time!"

A moment later he was a dozen feet away, sprawled behind a rock, the stock of his rifle pressed against his cheek. A glancing slug threw sand in his face as he fired, and he rolled over, wiping his eyes. Tossing a look at Audrey, he saw her suddenly bring up her rifle and fire upward. The direction of his gaze swivelled around. Hard on the instant, a bullet whined past his face. He was not long in locating its source.

A dozen yards up the canyon wall, at the edge of a ragged crevice, hung a dissipating puff of gunsmoke.

Alarm leaped alive in his eyes. With one of the outlaws ensconced in that high vantage point, it could be only a matter of minutes before the fight was brought to a conclusion. None of the boulders on which he had been depending afforded sufficient protection against rifle-fire from there. It was a case of move in a hurry, or give up.

Reaching his feet in a bound, Carver plunged for a narrow overhang of rock. Bringing up his rifle, he brought it to bear on the danger point. Evenly spaced, his shots rang hollowly as he held the marksman there.

"Get back!" he cried to Audrey. "Hurry!"

It meant a further, and perhaps final, retreat into the canyon cleft, but she did not hesitate. It was shadowy back there, a jumble of boulders and slabs and jagged fragments. Audrey waited only long enough to make certain that Carver was hard on her heels, then plunged into it.

"This way!" he exclaimed, catching her hand and hurrying her forward. More than once they were stopped completely; but turning back, by going the other way around the obstruction, each time they found a means of clambering on. Carver boosted her up the ledges, then grasped her extended hand and followed. They were surprised at the distance they were able to climb without being at length halted for good. It meant abandoning the horses, but they had no thought for that. Guns still thundered behind them; now and again a stray shot clattered through the rocks near at hand; but in this labyrinth they were concealed for the moment from their pursuers.

"We can make a stand up in here—maybe hold them off for hours," Jim panted. He added shortly: "Until dark, anyway!"

Her face crimson from exertion, Audrey wasted no breath on a reply. Despite her knowledge of their predicament, she was overawed by the gloomy atmosphere of this place. There was something imminent in the huge masses of granite which gathered about them on every hand as if ready at a moment's notice to come crashing down to crush them. If she ever got out alive, it was certain that for ever afterward, mountains would spell something vastly different for her from what she had been accustomed to find in their picturesque if rather useless frieze against the horizon. But the change in her attitude

towards Jim Carver was even greater. She told herself that she saw him differently from ever before; that this coolness and resource in the pinch of danger would never fade from her mind.

Carver's thoughts were equally busy, if more immediately practical. As he continued to work upward from ledge to ledge, sometimes over rubble slides, he began to have hopes that this crevice would afford access to a higher level after all. It was like a great chimney, winding deviously upward, cracked and riven and treacherous; and he was momentarily in fear lest they reach an open stretch which would expose them to the fire of the outlaws.

He stopped to gaze upward. Audrey dropped on a rock a little apart. "I can't—go any—farther!" she gasped. "My heart—it's pounding like—mad!"

He whirled. "We'll rest," he assured her. "Move back a bit if you can. Into that crevice—"

He took her rifle. "Wish we had a rope," he muttered, his tone troubled. "We could get up there, if——"

"I'll try," she told him. "I feel—better, now."

He shook his head. "Crawl back in that hole. It looks quite deep."

"You mean we'll stay here?"

"For now." He was short. "Hustle, Audrey——" He had caught the cautious scrape of a boot, drifting up from below.

He waited while she explored the crevice. It was almost a cave. The darkness appeared intense; but she gave herself no time to think of vermin. The possibility of running into a wildcat didn't even occur to her.

There was a rock a little distance in over which she was forced to clamber. She stopped then, not wanting to explore farther. Perhaps it was not necessary. She waited in vain for her pulse to return to normal, but at least she regained something of her poise. After what seemed a long time, but could only have been a matter of minutes, she saw Carver's dark shape as he worked his way towards her.

"What is it?" she murmured.

He warned her with a hand. "They're coming," he whispered. "They're quite close——"

She knew then that this amounted to a last resort; that he meant to make a stand here, come what might. He lifted himself over the barrier rock, and straightened there in the

deep dusk of the cave. He still had both rifles, and silently thrust hers into her hands.

Suddenly she heard men outside. They murmured to one another; but the sound of their boots was quite clear. Metal clinked on stone. Her breath caught, and again her heart began to race. She held the rifle tightly, her knuckles whitening.

Carver's grip on her arm forced her down as a shadow appeared at the cave's mouth. A man was coming in. Jim kept his eye on the place where he must appear. The next instant, he saw the other. It was Curly Brennan. The outlaw was peering into the cave, warily hearkening. Not content with a cursory examination, he came on.

Jim crouched, his rifle at the ready. When Curly's head appeared over the rock, he half-lifted it to his shoulder. For a long, breathless second the two men stared into each other's eyes. Jim never knew why he did not pull trigger. Some unread impulse held him; and he was pleased with his self-control, for the next second Curly turned back. He walked out of the cave as matter-of-factly as if nothing whatever had happened.

"Nothin' in there——" they heard him say carelessly to his companions.

Audrey could scarcely believe her ears. "Is it possible that he saw nothing?" she breathed in Jim's ear.

"Sh-h-h!" was his only response. But his thoughts were furiously busy. From the first he had put Curly down as a man of decent instincts. The only explanation of this occurrence must be that Brennan was deliberately and coolly giving them a break. Carver recalled now the poor marksmanship of which he had believed Curly guilty. That, too, had been intentional.

"Where in hell could they a' gone?" one of the renegades rumbled harshly. "They can't be fur——"

"They shoved on up," was Curly's easy rejoinder. Evidently he had moved ahead of the others. "Here's a mark, looks like boot-nails."

There was more trampling, and dust and fragments of rock rattled down; gradually these sounds died out. Carver straightened once more. He appeared relieved; yet his face was tense.

"Have they gone on?" Audrey inquired.

"I believe so. Good thing, too," he made answer grimly. "We'll go now—or wait! I'll have a look first."

There were a dozen questions she wanted to ask him. What were they to do now? Where had Stack's outlaws gone? But she held her peace. Well she knew that matters were in Jim's hands; that she must depend on him completely.

As for Carver, he was wondering if this could be a ruse of the outlaws to avert further fighting and grab him and Audrey as they emerged from the cave. While he gave Curly his full due, he was by no means wholly reassured by his reading of the other's actions. Brennan and the others might be lying in wait in the rocks out there; and a single mistake now could not be rectified by any means.

Cautiously he reconnoitred, ready to blow the first man who presented himself into Kingdom Come. But there was nothing—no warning sign of any description. He listened acutely, and after a moment caught a rattling from somewhere on up the rocky chimney. He knew then that he had been right, and Curly Brennan had led those wolves past his covert with deliberate intent.

"Come," he called back into the cave guardedly. "We've got to clear out in a hurry!"

She was soon at his side.

"Back down with you," he told her quickly. "We must get to the horses before they discover something is wrong——"

How speedily they covered the descent, which had cost them laborious minutes in the climbing! But Audrey noted that hastily as he moved, Jim took especial pains to make no undue noise. More than once he snatched a dislodged stone just in time to prevent its clattering fall. If she wondered why he took these precautions, his purpose was clear when they had come to the bottom of the crevice and he murmured:

"They've probably left someone to guard the broncs. I'll have to take him by surprise——"

With this explanation, he stole on. From each rock he peered carefully before proceeding. Finally she saw him gaze longer than usual, and then suddenly drop. She did the same and waited. He did not delay, however, crawling around the boulder the other way. She watched his progress, marvelling at his grace and lightness. He was like some light-footed cougar; and there was something of the same animal in his tense poise.

Clearing the rock, he checked himself, started to drop, and then changed his mind. The girl saw him spring along a ledge and launch into the air in a flying dive. Then she saw the man who had been left to guard the horses. He caught a flash of Jim out of the corner of his eye; but before he could whirl, before he could bring his gun into play, Carver smashed into him.

They went down together, the outlaw's gun flying. It struck a rock and exploded. Carver rose at once, with no need to make sure of his antagonist. The man was out cold. Jim swung to Audrey.

"Hurry!" he called. "We've got to clear out pronto—that shot'll bring Stack back in five minutes' time!"

Already they heard a hail from far up the rocky wall. The outlaws were alarmed, asking themselves the meaning of the firing. When their associate failed to answer, they would know at once what was afoot.

Carver swung Audrey astride her pony with scant ceremony. Jerking loose the reins of the outlaws' broncs, he started them away with a few slaps of his hat. Then he swung aboard his own mount. A moment later, they were clattering down the canyon.

CHAPTER XVIII

AN echoing bellow rang and shivered through the narrow gorge when the outlaws realized what had happened. The *crang-g!* of rifles was added to the uproar. But after the first few minutes, Carver had no fears of their being struck by a stray bullet. Quickly he and Audrey put a bend of the canyon between them and the defeated renegades. He breathed his relief then.

"They're high and dry for a while!" he exulted, with a shining face for Audrey.

The girl showed the reaction of relief. The tension of the last hour had told heavily on her, despite her courage. She managed a plucky smile.

"Wouldn't this be an excellent chance to capture them?" she asked.

"That's the first thing I saw," he nodded. "But first I'm going to get you back to the ranch."

There was that in his tone which told her how much he regretted having brought her at all. The adventure had ended happily, but that did not alter the fact that it might have turned out otherwise. She was herself sobered by the narrowness of her escape.

"There can be no danger now," she said. "Perhaps I can return to the ranch alone——"

Jim hesitated. He shook his head then, not bothering to point out the excellent chance she stood of getting lost on the way. This was a vast country. Well as she might think she knew it, he was not deceived. There were times when he became confused himself.

"I'll go with you," he said. "There'll be time."

They shoved the outlaws' horses along briskly. It was only a matter of minutes before they approached the mouth of the canyon. Suddenly Carver drew rein. Audrey noted it.

"What is wrong?" she inquired.

"I'm thinking of Strange," he answered. "He wasn't with that bunch. I made sure of that. And he has a horse."

His brevity told her how seriously he took the matter.

"Perhaps he is still where you left him," she said hopefully.

That possibility was dispelled the next moment when, pushing on, they reached the spot. Neither Jared Strange nor his bronc were anywhere to be seen. Holding the horses, Carver prospected the situation, a troubled frown creasing his brow.

"If he's learned what's up, he'll go for help," he declared positively.

Audrey began: "But if he didn't go into the canyon——?"

Carver made up his mind with characteristic speed. "You stay here with the horses," he told her. "I'll cruise around and see if I can pick him up. It'll be clear loss of time if I don't, but in that case——" His hesitation said that in that case, it wouldn't matter what he did.

Jabbing the spurs home, he jumped his bronc towards the long wooded slope of Slide Mountain. He was soon lost to her sight amidst the trees, and climbing steadily. The steepness of the slope pulled his bronc down to a slower pace. From time to time he dismounted and led the way over a particularly treacherous spc.. He was working back towards the spot where the outlaw band had been stranded.

This long slant was cut up into serried ridges. Topping the first, he hauled in long enough to scan the billowing expanse of wilderness surrounding him. An immemorial peace held this land. The vagrant breezes stirred the fronds of the pines. A magpie hammered the afternoon with its harsh song. As near as he could tell, there was no other sign of life within miles.

He was starting down the short dip of the ridge towards the rising slope of the next when something arrested his attention. He shoved out into a clear space, and gazed upward intently. On that long craggy slant above him there was a gash where no pines had been able to find a foothold; and across it, angling steadily, he descried a horseman working his careful way.

It was Strange. He needed no more than a glance to tell him that. Something in the urgency with which the Easterner was travelling told him as well that Strange knew. He was heading away from the canyon now. Probably it was his design to seek fresh mounts for the outlaws.

Carver had no notion of how far he would be forced to go for them. It might take him a long time, or it might not. In any event, Jim knew that only by a miracle would he have the time himself to ride to the spread for help and return before Stack and his crowd were once more astride of ponies. The hope that there would be time for him to summon Sheriff Lanning and effect a capture was so far-fetched that he scarcely gave it a second thought.

It was equally improbable that he would be able to overtake and stop Strange. Once the other disappeared beyond the far rim of the ridge, he would be as good as gone.

But one chance remained. Carver did not hesitate to take it. Drawing his rifle from the saddle-sheath, he swung to the ground. A step took him to a large rock which would serve as a rest for the weapon. Plastering himself against it, he cuddled the gun to his cheek and drew a careful bead on the distant rider.

It was a long shot—all of three hundred yards. Perhaps it was farther. Carver told himself that he must allow for the wind. Nor had he ever found it as easy to shoot uphill as men had claimed it to be. Lying there, taking all these factors into consideration, he made his choice and deliberately squeezed the trigger. The report echoed down the hills. He froze, watching Strange keenly. His shot had come close.

The Easterner drew rein and cast a surprised look about. His eyes roamed the wild slopes. But a puff of breeze had dissipated the smoke of Carver's shot almost as soon as it had formed; he could not locate his assailant from that. After a moment he started on.

Carver promptly fired a second time. Again Strange came to a halt. "If I can only keep him in one position," Jim muttered, "it should be twice as easy." While Strange was still gazing about apprehensively, he shot a third time. He was getting the range now, for Strange appeared suddenly frightened. He got off his horse and ran a little distance along the steep slope, his boots sliding. He appeared looking for a rock or some other satisfactory cover. There was none, however. Running back, he threw himself on his horse.

Carver's fourth shot made him shove the bronc ahead at a too-reckless speed. The animal went down in a sliding fall. Only by dint of straining effort did Strange save himself. He leaped off, retaining the bridle-reins, and threw all his weight against them, his heels gouging deep. The horse struggled momentarily, while Carver inexorably shot again; then it regained its legs. Jim saw its owner gazing about desperately. He knew what was running through Strange's mind. The man was not yellow; that had been demonstrated once for all. But he was in the grip of a panic, induced by the fact that some undiscovered foe meant apparently to kill him, while there was so little that he could do about it.

Evidently he decided that his one chance was to cross the long open slant, trusting to providence; for he mounted and started out. But as Carver had guessed, his sixth shot made the man change his mind once more. This time he flinched; Jim saw his arm flash up in a purely instinctive gesture of defence. He was fighting the most monstrous fear of all, the fear of the unknown. Suddenly he slid from the saddle on the off side of his mount and remained the e. The horse was the sole cover to be had. Clearly Strange meant to search out the mysterious marksman and attempt to rout him by means of a return fire.

I was all right with Jim. It was not his purpose to kill the man. While he was entirely willing to take that chance, if need be, of one thing he was sure: that he must stop Strange.

Taking his time now, he took aim again. He was basing his calculations on his estimate of where his previous

shots had fallen. Calmly, deliberately, he got set and fired. As if twitched on an invisible string, Strange's bronc suddenly reared, pawing the air. But for his yanking savagely on the reins, the animal might have come toppling down the long ghastly slant in a rolling heap. Carver did not wait to fire again. Hard on the heels of his last, the shot finally accomplished what he had set out to do.

The Easterner's horse took a mighty leap as if stung. But even as it did so, the vital strength ran out of it. It landed sprawling and started to roll; nor did it stop as long as Jim watched, carrying a miniature slide of gravel and stones with it, while a dust plume rose high in the air. After a couple of moments, horse and all disappeared behind the fringe of trees a hundred yards below.

Tossed and thrown by his pony's plunge, Strange picked himself up and crouched on the slope, defenceless and yet fiercely defiant. Carver guessed how his rage boiled at this development. As for Jim, he methodically refilled the chamber of his rifle, with no more concern for the man above, except to watch what he did. Strange calmed rapidly when it appeared that he was to be the object of no more bombardment. He retrieved his rifle and started away on foot. Jim nodded his satisfaction at seeing him head back the way he had come.

"He's going back to Stack and the others," he murmured. "It couldn't have worked out better."

Turning to his horse, he swung astride and turned back down the slope he had climbed with such straining effort. It was easy to negotiate now. At times the bronc sat on its heels and slid, Carver reining back to avert a headlong plunge. Cannily the horse avoided the flashing pine snags. In a surprisingly short time, the slope began to ease.

Trotting out into the open, Carver saw Audrey. Her face was drawn with apprehension, which relaxed instantly on catching sight of him.

"I heard the firing," she explained. "It sounded savage—pitiless. I was beginning to fear . . ."

"I found Strange. He's afoot," he returned abruptly, without explaining how it had come about. She asked no questions.

"We'll get down the hills in jig-time," Carver continued briskly. "There's not a minute to spare. If I'm not mistaken, we'll not only put the Indian sign on that whole crowd

this time, but get your father out of his difficulties as well."

The brightness which returned to her face spoke eloquently of how much the prospect meant to her.

"Then let us hurry," she exclaimed.

The broncs belonging to Stack's crowd gave no particular trouble on the way downward. They were magnificent stock, and more than once Jim asked himself what would happen if they took it into their heads to stampede. Scarcely a one but was more fleet than the animals he and Audrey bestrode. That was nothing unusual in the horses of outlaws, since the speed with which they were able to take flight often spelled the difference between escape and capture.

It had been noontime when Carver had had his meeting with Jared Strange which had culminated so violently. An hour had covered the fast-moving adventure in the canyon. The sun was still high when he and the girl came in sight of an old branding-pen on the edge of the Midnight range. Its gate was open.

"We'll throw the stuff in this," Carver said.

Audrey helped him haze the horses in. Reining to a pivoting halt before the gate, with the last of the captive broncs inside, Jim slid from the saddle and lifted the bars, to shove them nito place. He wasted no time in exulting over what had been accomplished, however. A moment and he was in the saddle again.

"Now for the J. C. and the boys——"

They started off.

They had gone little more than a mile before Carver hauled in with a jerk. On a brushy ridge off to the north, he had spotted two horsemen. One was waving frantically. He recognized Hunch and Candy at first glance.

The pair lost no time in making their way forward. Jim met them with a stern face.

"What are you doing way over here at the Padlock?" he demanded.

They grinned at him with rueful impudence. "Jest huntin' around," Candy returned easily. "Jim, shore as hell there's somethin' goin' on over here——"

"Why do you say that?"

"Somebody's been watchin' us——"

"You mean one of Stack's outfit?"

Candy shrugged. "Who else could it be?" he countered. "I tell yuh, they're jealous as all get-out whenever a gent goes near the Padlock house. Either they got a better hunch'n us, or——"

Carver said impatiently: "That's neither here nor there. Right now there's work waitin'——"

"Yeh?" From his manner, the pair sensed that whatever it was, it was urgent. "What's up, Jim?"

He gave them a full account of all that had taken place in the hills. Hunch's face expressed triumph when he had ended.

"What'd I tell yuh?" he crowed. "I *knowed* somethin' was due to break in a hurry!"

"You," Jim retorted shortly, "better break a cinch-strap getting to town for Heck Lanning. Tell him to scrape up a posse and hot-foot it up here. If he starts from the old branding-corral over in High Meadow, where Stack's horses are, he'll be able to trace our sign without any trouble."

Hunch stared suspiciously. "What yuh mean?" he demanded. "What'll you be doin'?"

"Candy and I are going back up there," was the answer, "and keep that crowd close-herded. Tell Lanning to make it damned snappy! We're not letting this chance slip through our fingers!"

"Okay," Hunch nodded grudgingly. He started to turn his horse.

"You can take Audrey with you as far as the spread," Jim added.

He saw in the girl's face that despite all she had been through, she wanted to remain on the scene of activity. But she did not demur. He wanted her where he knew she would be safe for the time being. That was enough. Obediently she started her pony, to fall in beside Hunch as they jogged away.

Carver and his companion lost no time in turning back up the hills. More than once Candy stole a glace at Jim's face, where the marks of his fight with Strange still showed. But that he was doing his thinking he demonstrated a moment later, when he said:

"Yuh reckon it's safe to leave Stack's hossflesh there in the old corral? I told yuh there's some hombre been prowlin' the Midnight, keepin' an eye on Hunch an' me."

Jim had been rolling over that very problem. He could not avoid asking himself if Candy was mistaken; for he had believed that the men he had set afoot in the hills, with the possible exception of Strange himself, had comprised Bill Stack's entire gang.

"It would be plain hell to have anythin' slip now," the lanky one proceeded. Carver nodded agreement.

"We'll ride back that way."

They were within a quarter-mile of the old pen, and topping a swell in the range, when Candy reined down sharply. "What the hell!" he burst out harshly. He was staring towards the distant corral. And the next moment: "Jim—I told yuh! *Look!*"

Carver had his swift glimpse of the outlaws' horses just as they were stamping out of the gate. He saw too the man who had let down the bars, throwing himself astride his bronc and starting to haze them away. There could be no doubt, from his stealth and haste, that he was one of the renegades.

"Come on!" he cried. "We've got to break that game up in a hurry!" Yanking out his rifle as he spoke, he took a snapshot at the man who was attempting to ruin all his work. Then he jabbed home the spurs.

CHAPTER XIX

SHOVING the horses hard, the outlaw made for the hills. He had his hands full, keeping them bunched. It did not take long to tell that they would overtake him, with any luck at all.

He had his rifle out now. Turning in the saddle, he threw a shot at them. Carver heard the slug slash through the brush. He steadied himself and returned the fire. As near as he could tell, it had no effect. Candy was firing as well. Neither allowed their speed to slacken in the slightest. For that reason, it would have been a miracle had they made a hit.

The owl hoot was shrewd. He was making for a long wash that wound into the hills. The going there was not any too good, but the horses had been shoved around so much today that they were spooky. They made short work of scrambling over the rocks that appeared in their path.

Just as they thundered into the wash with the outlaw hard on their heels, Jim fired again. He had the satisfaction of

seeing the man's hat fly from his head. A moment later the other was in the wash.

Jim's bronc began to labour as it struck the upgrade. He had pushed it hard during the day; it was small wonder if it began to evidence fatigue now. Candy forged ahead. Suddenly he drew rein with a yank that all but threw him over his mount's head. Carver was not long in discovering the reason.

"Dang him—he's pulled up an' is tryin' to bushwhack us!" Candy exploded angrily.

Jim nodded. He halted his own horse, as several bullets droned perilously close. By reason of the winding of the wash, it was impossible to catch a glimpse of the outlaw. He had placed himself behind a tongue of rocks, from which he set up a raking fusillade. To forge on in the teeth of it would be to court almost certain death. Their only alternative was to work around the spot.

"Circle him," Jim grunted curtly. "We'll aim to cut him off from the broncs!"

They shoved their mounts at the wall of the wash. It was steep at this point, but they wasted on time in hunting a better place. Gravel and soil slipped down as the hoofs of the horses dug in. The muscles on their haunches stood out. Once Jim's bronc all but toppled backward. He saved it by throwing his weight forward. At last they were at the top.

The scrub pine came down close to the wash's edge, a thick impeding tangle. Somehow they forced their way through. Once they struck better going, their pace mended. They cut a sharp circle about the point at which the outlaw had sought to ambush them. It took time; and when they broke out at a place overlooking the wash once more, the man they sought was nowhere to be seen.

"He got wise to our game!" Candy cried harshly. "He's forggin' them hosses, Jim! He'll git away!"

It was a fact that their recapture of the ponies no longer looked as easy as it had.

They worked their way upward, paralleling the course of the wash, but avoiding its bends. Half a mile farther on, they came to open country. Across at its far edge, already near the rising slopes of the Tetons, they saw the quarry. Even as they spotted him, the horses broke and threatened to scatter.

"Come on!" Jim rifled. "We'll nail him yet!"

They raced forward. The outlaw saw them. He wasted no time in firing at them now, all his efforts were bent on rounding up the horses. But they appeared to be imbued with a perversity of their own; every time he would have got them bunched, one of them wheeled suddenly and made a dash for liberty. Carver and Candy drew up on them rapidly.

Suddenly perceiving his predicament, the outlaw gave up the hope of catching the recalcitrant horse and wheeled back. Throwing a shot at Candy, he hazed the rest of the horses on. Jim shot once more, apparently without any result.

"Nab that stray!" he directed Candy. I'll fog him! If I have any luck, I'll smoke him in a few minutes!"

Candy turned his mount and made for the straying horse. Carver pounded on. Steadily he drew up once more. The outlaw saw him. He was shoving the bunch towards a shallow canyon; once in it, he would be in as advantageous a position as he had found the wash to be. Jim saw it too.

Deliberately, repeatedly, trying to accommodate himself to the jolting of the pony under him, he fired at the fugitive. The latter replied with interest. A slug whined past Jim's face: another clipped the skirt of his tapadero. He gritted his teeth and held on, still trying to place the one shot which would conclude the matter as decisively as had his shot at Strange's horse a short time before.

Try as he would, he could not accomplish it. A few minutes later, the quarry reached the canyon's mouth.

He seemed to know then that the game was his. Deliberately he allowed his bronc to slow. There was a rocky dyke stretching across the canyon a short distance in from its mouth. Rounding this in the wake of the horses, the man coolly drew up.

At the first burst of smoke from his rifle, Jim knew he had a first-rate marksman to deal with. His prudence awakening in a flash, he withdrew from the folly of trying to rush the other. With a muffled curse, he turned aside.

He was still debating his course when Candy rode up, the reins of the captured horse in his hand.

"It's the same story over again!" Jim told him tersely. "We'll never pull that gent down by foggin' at his heels. Our one chance is to head the canyon."

"Yuh know the country up there?" Candy demanded. Carver shook his head.

"Not any too well. But if we hope to snag those broncs again before Stack's crowd gets them, we've got to work mighty fast!"

Without ado they turned aside and addressed themselves to the steep climb up the mountain-side. Deer trails aided them at times; but in general, these took too easy a slope, and thereby lengthened the distance. Jim tossed such expedients aside and started directly upward. Candy followed without a word. Soon they were fighting brush, down-timber, and the rock out-croppings which all but halted their progress.

It was a long hour before they topped the endless slope and gazed over the rough country beyond. There was a wooded bench, and then the land rose in another steep pitch. They saw the gap of the twining canyon a few hundred yards to one side.

"No point in trying to get down into it here," Jim said. "We'll keep on——"

The sun had sunk low in the west and the purple and mauve shadows were long when at last they headed the canyon. It seemed impossible they had got here in time. But if they had, then the outlaw was bottled up; he could only turn back down-canyon, and eventually they would probably reclaim the horses.

Carver rode out into the open at the canyon's head with pounding pulse. He did not need to be told how much depended on what the next few moments had to offer. He drew rein and looked at the ground carefully—and a groan was wrenched from him. There, plain in the dirt, were the tracks of the horses they sought. They had already passed this point.

"There goes everything!" Jim ground out savagely. "Just when we had the game in a tow sack, this had to happen!"

Riding up, Candy took one look at his face, and then at the tell-tale tracks cutting up the soil. As plainly for him as for Carver, they spelled the fact that the hope of effecting the capture of the outlaws now might well be lost.

Turning away from the place where his horse had been shot, Jared Strange set out on foot for the head of the canyon in which Carver and Audrey had been penned. He was in a savage mood. While he had not once seen the rifleman who had made such a summary job of his bronc, he was by no means in the dark as to who was responsible.

He cursed Carver bitterly as he plodded, his boots constantly slipping sidewise with the stiff slant of the mountain slope. "Damn his soul!" he raged. "I should have had him taken care of while there was plenty of time!" The set of his rocky face said that he would rectify the mistake at the first opportunity.

Twenty minutes later, his mood still unsoftened, he met Stack and his crowd wearily climbing out of the canyon. Bill was the first to spot him. He stopped dead, staring.

"What in hell happened to you, Strange?" he demanded gruffly, when the latter came up.

"The same thing that happened to you," the Easterner snapped sharply. "Does that make you want to laugh?"

They all gazed at him blankly. At length Curly spoke up.

"Yuh mean Carver fogged yore bronc off an' left yuh afoot?" he queried incredulously.

"Worse than that," was the short answer. "He shot it!"

One of the outlaws turned on Stack angrily.

"Dammit all, Bill!" he jerked out. "Yuh shore landed us in a fine pickle, with yore swell ideas!"

Stack treated him to an implacable glare. "Careful uh yore talk, Abe!" he warned.

Abe was not cowed in the slightest. "Why should I?" he retorted venomously. "This is all yore fault; I suppose yuh can deny that!"

"I don't see it," Stack growled in a surly tone.

"Yuh ain't lookin' very hard," Abe insisted. "It was yore scheme to bag Carver an' the girl in the canyon. We pinned 'em there fer yuh—an' look at the hash yuh made of it!"

"That's gospel, Abe," another spoke up. "Carver ain't overlookin' none of his aces. He'll have a posse up here to nab us quick as yuh could bat an eye!"

He stared his indignation at Stack, and the big fellow did not fail to note that others were muttering.

"That's jest like the pack of yuh!" he exclaimed sarcastically. "The minute anything goes haywire, yuh blame it on to me! . . . If Reb was still with us, yuh'd be singin' another song——"

"If Reb was still with us," a man retorted, "we wouldn't be in this jackpot!"

"What yuh aim to do about it?" Stack demanded

bleakly. Evidently he had decided the time had come for a showdown. "Yuh never acted this way before, till Strange here showed up! He's the gent that's behind most of this!"

A pause followed his challenge, and for a moment the silence here was taut with menace. One after another, the outlaws avoided Stack's baleful eyes. All but Curly. The latter met his glare levelly, and there was something akin to contempt in his steel-cold pupils."

"Wal, Brennan?" Stack said softly.

Curly said coolly: "What?"

"Is it Strange, or me?" Bill put it to him bluntly. "I know we're in a hell of a fix; but I'm sick of this shilly-shallyin'. We'll find out where we stand. Is it Strange—or me?" he insisted, with sinister inflection.

Curly's laugh was short and mirthless.

"Now that yuh mention it, I am, damn' sick of ridin' with yuh, Stack—or walkin', fer that matter."

Something like desperation came into Bill's lined face. He had watched his dominance of this crowd slipping for a long time. Now he was putting it to the test—and the answer was bitter on his tongue.

"So yo're rattin', eh?" he ground out.

A wire-taut impulse thrilled through Curly's gnarled frame. He jerked a nod, his eyes scathing.

"If that's what yuh call it, Stack—yeh, I am! I'm fed up with yore way of doin' things, if yuh want to know the rest of it. Where've we got since yuh was headin' the boys? There ain't been a job that we ain't botched fer lack of plannin'—little or big—an' not a big job pulled since Reb left us! Why, it's enough to make Reb Battle turn over in 'is grave to see the kind of white-livered fanny yuh turned out to be! . . . Yuh needn't figger to throw no bluff with me neither," he drove on. "I got no patience with such damned foolishness. . . . Throw yore gun on me an' I'll blast yuh into the middle of next week!"

"Let 'im have it anyway, Curly!" Abe spoke up gruffly. "Damn him, he's a hoodoo—a blight. What yuh say is shore correct. We'll never git anywheres while hes' leadin' us!" He added: "I'm fer tossin' him out, for one!"

Jared Strange had taken little part in this argument; or at least, so it would have appeared to an observer. But his influence had been strong. For a long time he had been driving

this secret wedge between Bill Stack and his gang. Suddenly, he saw his work bearing fruit at last. Stack saw it too. His visage twisted into a mask of rage and hatred, he whirled on Strange.

"*Yo're* responsible fer this, Strange!" he blazed. "I've got a mind to drill yuh here an' now!"

It was not by accident that the muzzle of Strange's rifle had ceased to sag, and was directed squarely at Stack's broad chest. Strange grinned unpleasantly. There was no need for a more explicit answer.

Stack was beside himself with bewilderment. He scarcely knew how it had all come about; but it seemed that every man's hand was turned against him to-day, and even fate itself had shown him a frowning face. How Carver had managed to slip out of the tightly drawn net he did not yet know; but that he was in a tighter place than he had been for a long time, he needed no reminder whatever.

He knew only too well that gun-play, here and now, would be fatal to but one man—himself. It rendered his impotence acute. Turning on his heel, he flung away.

"The hell with yuh," he burst out. "Do what yuh damn please—I'm figurin' to save my own hide!"

They watched in surprise as he started off. Curly's lip curled derisively. Perhaps no one but Strange himself had expected Bill to pull out without a fight of some kind. But knowing his jealous nature, none believed that he meant it. Abe broke out harshly with the suggestion that a slug be planted between his shoulders. It was as promptly vetoed by Curly. They were still arguing the matter when a thud of hoofs whirled them around.

For a moment they stared, unbelieving. Then a man cried exultantly: "It's Idaho! Somehow he's snagged our broncs ag'in! By Gawd, what do yuh think of that fer luck?"

A moment later, each was claiming his own mount and swinging astride. Strange, for whom there was no extra horse, climbed up behind one of the others. Seeing what was happening, Bill Stack had turned and was coming back.

"Where's my bronc, Idaho?" he demanded. Staring from man to man and from horse to horse, his face fell. "Don't tell me yuh let it git away from yuh?"

Idaho shrugged. "Carver an' his pal was tailin' me close," he said flatly. "I was lucky to git away with as

many as I did." He gathered himself together then, and his eyes flashed. "Boys—what in hell do yuh s'pose I stumbled on to?"

Strange shot a look at him. "What is it, man?" he said curtly. "Spill it!"

"Down at the Padlock," Idaho supplied, with a wolfish grin. "I was watchin' Carver's pals down there, an' I think I've stumbled on to the secret of that map he's holdin'. . . . Do yuh git it? The cache! I'm purty shore I know where it is!"

CHAPTER XX

CARVER and Candy Sims stared at each other in consternation at their defeat. Carver's first thought was of Audrey.

"Reckon this is bad," the lanky one said finally, his homely face long.

"It would have been a real break to nab that bunch. We would have been sure of saving Harkness's life. But now I don't know," Jim said. "I don't know."

"Yuh mean they'll knock him off to shut his mouth?"

Carver's nod was sober.

"We kin fog up there where yuh left 'em," Candy suggested hopefully. "They can't git far. An' Lannin'll be showin' up before too long——"

"It's our only chance," Carver agreed. "As for Heck Lanning . . ." He did not complete the thought. But Candy knew that Hunch's finding the sheriff quickly was a problematical matter. Both wished now that Hunch was with them.

They lost no time in climbing the hills. It was a continual fight to gain time on the hard going. Their one consolation was the fact that the owlhoot who had evaded them forced to the same task. Clinging to the trail of the outlaws' horses, they made as good time as he. But they did not catch sight of him.

Carver well knew the frame of mind Stack's crowd would be in. Once in possession of their broncs, they would be ready for anything. As for John Harkness, he had one hope left—that Curly, the outlaw who had spared himself and Audrey, would be able to do something for the man, if he chose.

They made better progress on the occasional open going. Candy still led the captured horse. That it irked him was patent, but when he proposed leaving it in a safe place, Jim vetoed the suggestion at once.

"I've got an idea that may work out, if nothing else will," was all he said.

They reached the place where he had fought with Strange. Candy looked the ground over with a wry smile. "Judgin' from yore looks," he commented, "Mister Queer must be a sight!"

Carver indicated the canyon in which he and Audrey had had their adventure. There was no point in entering it now. He said: "Ten to one they climbed out the top. I saw Strange making in that direction after I downed his bronc. He'll be with them now."

"That won't improve matters any neither," Candy grunted.

"No. I don't know just what the set-up is. I've been under the impression that Bill Stack was the big Buffalo Bill. But now I'm not so sure. Strange fits into the outfit somewhere near the top."

Pushing on, they essayed the long slope of Slide Mountain. Neither needed to be reminded of the imperativeness of haste. They were soon afoot, saving their horses as well as they could. But the ponies were fagged. Jim switched to the outlaw's horse to give his bay a chance, in the intervals when he was not leading the way, his boots gouging out soil and rocks that slid and rolled and cracked. He was in a perspiration, his face red as fire. Candy was in no better case.

"Dang their—souls," he gasped. "If I ever come up with 'em, I'll—take it outa their hides fer makin's me work like—this!"

They had lost the sign of the recaptured horses. Again and again whatever faint trail there was had disappeared completely, carried away in a slide of shale or gravel. But Jim had a clear enough idea of the outlaw's objective. He no longer sought to trace the man.

Half an hour saw them high on Slide's precipitous shoulder. They were in the pines now. Carver started to work to the left, towards the canyon's head. It had been near here that Strange had met the outlaws; of that he was sure. They might still be in the neighbourhood.

Another ten minutes brought them abruptly to the canyon. It was little more than a treacherous crack in the mighty slope. As Jim had foreseen, the chimney extended all the way to the top. Dismounting, and sliding down there by hanging on and letting himself slip from clump to clump in the brush, he approached the spot. In the soil were the marks of riding boots. One place was trampled considerably, as though the outlaws had stood here in hot discussion. Then the trail led off, angling down the slope. It entered the trees, and here there was nothing to go by save the deep gouges in the pine-needle mat.

"Follow me," Jim called to Candy. "Bring the horses. They went this way——"

A hundred yards below he found where the men had stopped again. Here Strange had joined them.

A little farther on, he found a place where several of the men had run, their heels digging in. They stopped where the outlaws had met the returning horses.

"Didn't lose any time in clearing out," Jim mused. "They figured we'd not be far behind——"

The trail of the horses led downward once more. Staring at it, Candy vented an exclamation of disgust.

"Damn it all, did we climb way up here jest to find that out?" he groused. It was only his way of covering the seriousness of the situation. "Where yuh reckon they're headin'?"

Jim thought it out before answering.

"Off-hand, I'd say they were hitting for their hide-out. It wouldn't escape them that once I had put them afoot, my first move would be towards rounding them up. It won't suit their book to be here when Lanning shows up with a posse."

That made sense, and Candy nodded. "But kin we stick to their sign?"

To voice the question was to seek for its answer. They set off without ado. Jim avoided the trail, lest he obliterate some indication of a turn-off before it had been read. Candy followed suit. So steep was the pitch of the slope that going down was even harder work than the climb had been. Carver spared a glance for the westering sun, noting its proximity to the long bank of rosy bronze clouds on the horizon. They had no great amount of daylight left, he reflected. Once night fell he considered the hope of rescuing John Harkness a slim one. Knowledge of what it would mean to Audrey drew

his mouth into a thin line. He endeavoured to throw the feeling off then. It was only intuition that told him Harkness's tenure of life was drawing out to its end. But he did not succeed in wholly banishing his fears.

Half a mile below, in a rocky gully under the long slope, the trail faded out. They followed it a hundred yards by means of the scratches left by iron shoes; then it was gone. Carver glanced about. Down here, the long shadows of rocky spires and broken granite ridges were already thickening. Pine and aspen hemmed in the spot, dead trees slanting out of bleached tangles at the edge of the wood, touching the scene with an incredible wildness. He turned to Candy.

The lanky one's face was sombre. "Dammit, Jim—we jest ain't gittin' nowheres!" he burst out.

"We could certainly expect that crowd to break its trail," Jim pointed out reasonably.

"So that leaves us right where we was before——"

"I'm not so sure of that." Carver indicated the led bronc. "We've got this at least."

Candy scowled at the animal, then shook his straw-coloured head dubiously. "If yuh figger that critter to lead us to the owlhoot's hide-out, I'm afraid it's a bust."

"We can try."

Candy assented grudgingly. "We kin try——"

Carver tossed the pony's rein over the saddle-horn and gave it a kick to start it. The roan started away hastily, trotted a few yards, and slackened to a walk. Then it began to climb up the gully.

"It's goin' somewheres," Candy said gruffly.

They followed at a discreet distance. To all appearances the roan knew where it was going, clambering up the rocks in a business-like manner. It led them at length out of the rough going to a long wooded slope with a gentle gradient to the top. But it did not climb upward, striking into a deer trail and following it for a mile. A share of Carver's attention was given to study of their surroundings; but he was confident that were they to find their way to within half a mile of Stack's refuge, there would be little evidence of it as far as the eye could see.

"How in hell do yuh reckon Lannin' is goin' to find us when he does come?" Candy spoke up. "We're layin' down a trail like a Chinese puzzle."

"We'll take care of that," Carver answered, giving the question scant notice for the moment.

Ten minutes later the roan serenely wandered into a blind gulch and explored it in leisurely fashion. Candy's face grew red as he watched.

"Hell!" he exclaimed harshly. "That blasted plug is jest takin' a walk fer itself!"

Carver was afraid he was right. It was not easy to curb his impatience, aware as he was that time was running out. But he choused the roan back out of the gulch and waited to see where it would go. When it started matter-of-factly back over the deer trail by which it had arrived, he decided to give up.

"You were right, Candy," he said soberly. "My hunch was a bust. If the bronc ever takes us to Stack's hide-out at all, it probably won't be this week." He was at a loss as to how to proceed. There seemed scant hope that the sheriff would have put in an appearance as yet; but he decided to start down the hills.

They were discussing the hopelessness of the situation in chagrined tones ten minutes later, when Candy drew rein to point upward.

"Look at that!" he creid. "What in hell——"

Looking in the direction in which he pointed, Carver's glance picked up nothing until he described the incredible in that vast outspread scene—a man on foot, stumbling along the crest of a distant ridge. That he was unused to walking was plain. He tripped occasionally, and from time to time broke into a short run.

"It's a dead cinch we kin pick him up at least," Candy grunted. "But who kin it be?"

Carver wasted no time in vain speculations, kneeing his horse towards the ridge and shoving it into a jog.

"He'll try to duck us when he sees us coming," he warned. "Keep your eye on where he goes. We're not slipping up this time!"

Quickly, despite the jaded horses, they drew towards the top of the ridge. Canvassing the dismounted man's probable course, Jim set his own accordingly. he was not surprised when, after a few minutes, he lost sight of the other altogether.

"Close in!" he called sharply to Candy. "I think he's spotted us and is hiding——"

A moment later, to his amazement, he saw the man they sought running down the slope, waving his arms and shouting as though afraid he might not be able to attract their attention. But if that was unexpected, Carver was due for a still greater shock when he recognized the other. It was Bill Stack!

Carver drew in and watched the other's advance warily. Candy did the same, his eyes big and suspicious.

"My Gawd, Carver—what a break!" Stack ejaculated, coming up. "Yo're jest the man I wanted to find, but I didn't reckon there was a chance in a thousand."

If his intentions were belligerent, he successfully concealed the fact. Jim said curtly: "Pitch your gun out there in front of you, Stack——"

The outaw's beefy grin faded. "Hell!" he burst out. "Yuh don't think——" But he quickly changed that. "Carver, yuh got me all wrong. Not that I blame yuh a bit. But I ain't up to no game. I aim to throw in with yuh, if you'll let me!" As he spoke, he tossed his gun on the ground befor him.

Candy and Jim exchanged swift glances. The latter nodded. "We're willing to listen, Bill. But after what has been happening lately——"

Stack understood. He said: "Yo're huntin' fer Harkness, ain't yuh?"

Nothing in Carver's face revealed the jump his pulse took at mention of that name.

"What do you know about him?"

"We been holdin' him fer money," the outlaw said unblushingly. "Reckon yuh had that figgered out long ago. Yo're no fool, Carver——"

"Just why are you telling me this?" Jim demanded. Stack hesitated. A stubborn look came into his eyes.

"I'd tell anything' to square with them skunks!" he burst out furiously.

"Do you mean Strange, too?" Jim caught him up. Bill snorted.

"Him especially!" he ground out. "Yo're right again, Carver . . . Strange is one of the crowd. He swore nobody knew it, but I figgered yuh was wise all right." His tone, his whole manner, advertised his hatred and resentment against the Easterner. Jim thought he saw what had caused Stack to turn to him. He said:

"Strange attempted to step into your boots, is that it?"

"Damn him, he *did!*" Stack spat out. "The boys threw me down cold when we missed yuh there in the blind canyon. I dunno yet how yuh worked it——" He paused; but Carver had no intention of revealing Curly Brennan's action. Bill went on: "When Idaho Martin come back with the hosses, he didn't have mine. We was arguin'—I told the crowd where they got off. Not a one of 'em would offer to give me a lift!" His ox-like eyes widened at the injustice of it. "Me! Reb's pal, who always looked after 'em——" He shook his head. "Wal, I decided then an' there what I'd do about it!"

"Where is Harkness, Stack—in your hide-out?" Carver cut in briskly.

"Yeh—he's there, all right."

"Is he alive and well?"

Bill said yes. "He stalls on raisin' any more money, an' the boys have about decided the game is washed up, though . . . It was Strange's doin' from the start!" he drove on, with a fresh access of fury at remembering his rival. "Battle didn't want nothin' to do with it, but Strange insisted——"

"So Reb Battle was in on this?"

"Shore——"

"Just what do you propose, Stack?" Carver's tone was challenging. "Will you take us to Harkness?"

The outlaw nodded. "If you'll leave Heck Lannin' out of it," he added. "I don't want nothin' to do with him!"

"Just why are you doing this?" Jim probed. "What do you expect in return?"

Stack's eyes grew hard and cold. "A crack at Strange'll do me," he growled. "Lemme have my bronc that yo're leadin', an' stay with me at the Cache——"

"The Cache?" Jim queried, caught. Bill nodded.

"That's our hide-out."

"I see." Jim considered. "What if we throw a gun on you now, Stack, and take you in custody?" he said flatly. "Yo've always been outside the law. You've raided my ranch—made attempts on my life. What if I take you to Lanning, and we squeeze the truth out of you without any favours—and then toss you in jail?"

"Nothing' about it," Stack retorted, holding his gaze steadily. "Except that unless I'm mighty much mistaken, yuh ain't that kind of a man, Carver!"

CHAPTER XXI

JIM found something unanswerable in the outlaw's words. There was less harshness about his mouth as he shook his head.

"You fooled me, Stack," he admitted. "I was sure you would ask for something, and I thought I knew what it would be."

"Yeh, I know." Bill sounded gloomy. "Reckon the map wouldn't do me no good now——"

Jim was alert. "How's that?"

"The boys don't need it no more——"

"What!" The word cracked sharply.

Stack said: "Idaho was down at the Padlock, watchin' this feller"—he indicated Candy—"and the other. They was talkin' about how many feet, an' a hoss-headed rock an' so on. He heard it all. We know where that rock is. That's where the boys've gone now—they're after that cache."

Carver was electrified. "Where is it?" he demanded.

"Right there at the Padlock," Bill said shortly.

"Pick up your gun and climb aboard your bronc," Carver flung at him. He started to turn his horse, only to stop. "You're sure of this, Stack?" he snapped.

"There can't be no doubt about it," was the answer. Stack scooped up his gun under Candy's frowning eyes and mounted the horse. "Yuh headin' fer there now?"

Jim said curtly: "Right! There's a chance they can be nabbed before they get away. We'll tackle it. If we make out, the rest will take care of itself!" He shot Stack a level look. "Are you with us?"

Stack hesitated. "If you'll promise me to steer clear of Lanning——"

"I can't promise anything," Jim told him shortly. "But unless Lanning is faster than I think he is, it'll be all over before he arrives."

"An' then what?"

"You have my leave to go your own way—so long as it's a long ways from this range."

Stack digested that. "Okay, Carver," he said. "I believe yo're square. I'll play yore game. But——" He broke off on a note of indecision.

"But what?" Candy flung at him. He had little use for the outlaw, and not for a second did he cease to keep a close watch on his every move.

"I'm thinkin' of Lannin'," Stack confessed. "Yuh can't expect him to stand to no gent's agreement. If he runs afoul of me, he'll get lead before I'll let him slap me in the pen!"

Candy shrugged.

They lost no time in making for the Midnight range. It was a long ride. To make matters worse, the sun had dropped behind the western mountains. Dusk advanced. Within a short time it would be full dark. But even while it impeded, Carver looked towards its aiding their purpose in the end. Nothing but darkness would enable them to draw up on the outlaws close enough to effect their capture.

Night overtook them a mile from the Padlock. At a sign from Carver, they held to a long ridge which ran beside the winding course of Midnight Creek. They were not yet beginning to grow wary, when suddenly a group of horsemen took from in their path as if rising out of the ground. They were surrounded before they had time to make a move.

"Is that you, Jim?" he recognized Hunch's voice.

Carver's tension did not relax. He knew what this meant. "It's me, Hunch——"

"Never expected to find yuh," another man said gruffly. Jim looked at the lawman.

"You're just in time, Lanning," he answered soberly. "But as matters stand, I'd almost as soon you'd delayed an hour."

Hard on the heels of his words, Bill Stack suddenly made his break. Jim had expected it, and had made no move to block it. But that was not necessary. Two members of Lanning's posse—they were townsmen for the most part, or ranchers from the surrounding country—stopped Stack before he got fairly started.

Lanning frowned at the disturbance. "Who is that gent?" he inquired.

"Hell! It's Bill Stack!" one of the latter's captors burst out. All swung on Carver. "What's he doin' with you, Carver? He ain't yore prisoner. He's still got his gun——"

"That's right," Jim admitted quietly. "Stack came to us of his own accord."

"Yuh mean yuh ain't responsible fer him?" Lanning seemed to hang on the answer.

"Damn yuh, Lannin'!" Stack hurled at him. "I know beforehand what you're goin' to say!"

"Reckon you do," Heck responded grimly. "But what's he doin' down here?" It was to Carver that he spoke.

"Strange has taken over the leadership of his gang, Lanning," said Jim. "I always suspected him. Now he's been driven into the open——"

"What!" Lanning exclaimed, before he could go on. "Jared Strange, yuh say? In cahoots with them owlhoots?" His tone expressed his incredulity.

"That's right. And now, he and they are after a cache that Reb Battle buried in the Padlock yard—so Stack says."

"That right, Stack?" Lanning asked him.

Bill admitted as much, his gaze on Carver. "Though how yuh figgered out it was Reb who buried it, I dunno——"

"That was easy," Carver assured him. "But there's something about it that you can tell me. How much was in it?"

"Between eighteen an' twenty thousand. It was Harkness's money.

If Lanning had wanted confirmation of Carver's assertion that Strange was hand in glove with the outlaws, this supplied it with a vengeance. Nor did the reference to the missing Easterner escape him.

"So yuh know where Harkness is, Stack?"

"Shore I know."

"Jest what has Strange to do with all this?"

"Wal, it jest happened that he had a chance to help Reb out of a jam a year or so ago. Reb insisted on huntin' him up later. They got their heads together. It was Strange who tolled Harkness out to this country an' handed him over to us. Jest before the fight in Skeleton Canyon, that was. We'd squeezed Harkness of most of his wad—but Reb never lived to enjoy his cut. Him an' Strange buried a cache that disappeared; an' later, they got separated while Reb was still carryin' the biggest part of the wad. We knowed he cached it, because it was never found—an' we knowed it was while the posse fogged him down to the Padlock. But we never located it, an' didn't think of a map till it turned up with Lang an' Johnson. It must've been in that first cache they found."

"Yeh?" Lanning prompted, when Stack paused.

"That's all. Except that one of the boys overheard Carver's pals talkin' to-day, an' got the needed information."

Lanning turned interrogatively to Jim.

"I spoke to you of a paper that Tex gave me to hold," the latter reminded him. "I mentioned it in front of Strange—and that night, there was a raid on my spread. You'll remember that, Lanning. Strange was responsible."

"But hell, Carver! He was with me that day——"

"Till he saw a way to shake you," Jim corrected. "Then he rounded up his men and made straight for the J. C. They even beat Candy and me there. But they didn't get the map."

"An' so Strange has cut yore throat, an' yo're out fer revenge—eh, Stack?" Lanning said. "That what's in the wind?"

Jim said: "As near as we know, Strange and the gang are at the Padlock now, Lanning. We'll never get a better chance to pick them up." He started to shove his bronc into action.

"But Harkness——" the sheriff held him. "Where's he?"

"He's still alive," Carver assured him. "If we can grab that bunch, he'll be safe!"

They started on towards the Padlock, Bill Stack in custody. How little he liked it was patent, for he muttered to himself bitterly. Jim dropped back beside Candy.

"How did it happen this Idaho got so much?" he demanded. "You were mighty careless, Candy——"

Sims was sheepish. "Reckon we done some talkin'," he confessed. "It was there in the ranch yard. Idaho must'a been caught in the house—an' we never guessed it, dang the luck!"

"You were discussing the map?"

Candy admitted as much. "Nothin' queer in that. We been discussin' it fer a week," he defended himself stoutly. Jim made a disposing gesture.

"It don't matter now," he said. "It's too late to mend."

Carver was up beside Lanning when they neared the Padlock. These men were keyed for action, their faces intent. Rifles rested across their saddle-bows. Behind a rocky dyke separating them from the ranch yard, they drew up while Carver and the sheriff reconnoitred.

It took them but a few minutes to assure themselves that whoever had been here to-night, there wasn't a soul about the place now but themselves. Jim's heart sank. Not till this minute did he realize how much he had counted on rounding up the outlaws for Audrey's sake. If they were stopped cold before anything could happen to her father, Harkness would soon have been restored to her. As it was, he didn't know.

Moreover, he still professed himself in the dark as to the whereabouts of the cache.

They were moving towards the deserted yard, rounding the lower end of the rocky ledge, when suddenly, glancing up, Carver froze. A grunt of surprise escaped him. Lanning caught it.

"Huh?" he said. Carver simply pointed.

Outlined against the starlight, black and clear-cut, a ragged up-thrust of rock jutting out from the dyke presented the unmistakable appearance of a pony's head. Carver was filled with amazement as he gazed at it. It was a rock at which he had looked perhaps a dozen times in daylight, without once suspecting its peculiar properties.

"That's our horse-headed rock," he declared. "It never looked this way to me before, but there can't be any mistake."

He was speaking as though to himself. Stepping to the base of the rock, he turned and glanced about. There was a cottonwood across the yard.

"That looks like about forty paces——"

He started towards it with measuring strides. Had it been lighter, he would have seen the hole as he came to it; but in this velvety darkness, he felt his footing give without warning, and suddenly brought up with an exclamation on the side of a hole which had certainly been dug within the last hour or two.

"It's the cache!" he ejaculated. "Stack was right—they came here, and they located it! The money's gone, and so are they!"

In that moment, he was not thinking of the loss to Audrey, should the outlaws escape with their haul; though there was that to be considered too. What he was asking himself was where the men would be going.

"It's a tough break," Lanning muttered, as though reading his thought. "Reckon they're makin' fer their hide-out, tight as they kin go——"

"They may," Carver said, in a tone of reserve. Lanning caught it.

"Why shouldn't they?"

"Because they've thrown Stack down," was the answer. "They may not suspect that he's with us already; but they'll look for him to find some means of squaring accounts. Which means that they're not safe there any longer——"

"Right yuh are," Lanning acknowledged gruffly. "Reckon the thing fer us to do is to make fer there on the chance of overtakin' 'em——"

"If Stack will take us," Jim inserted.

Lanning grunted as if struck. He whirled as the others came up.

"Stack, yore crowd's been here an' hit back fer the hills."

Bill evinced no particular surprise at the news. The possemen gathered about the looted cache and looked it over. Stack appeared inclined to indifference, however.

"Yo're takin' us to their hide-out," Lanning told him tentatively.

Bill's answer was a mirthless smile.

"Why should I do that, Lanning? You're going to toss me in jail anyway. Go ahead, an' be damned to yuh!"

Lanning stared at him as if for once he had met with a problem he did not know how to solve.

"A man's life may depend on yo're doin' what we ask," he declared flatly. Stack was not impressed.

"I'm thinkin' of my own neck," he retorted.

"You better think of it again!" the sheriff warned him. "I can make it plenty hard fer you where yo're goin', Stack! I won't lift a finger to help yuh if yuh take that tone——"

Bill proved obdurate, however. "Yo're so damn' smart, all you law dogs," he sneered. "Now go ahead an' crack this nut. Yuh won't git any help from me."

Lanning grew purple. He was about to break into a volley of curses, when Carver touched his arm.

"Let me handle this," he advised. "I think I know how to persuade Stack to help us."

There was an assurance in his manner that got to Lanning. He hesitated only momentarily. "Yuh can take a try at it, Carver," he gave way grudgingly; "but yuh won't git

nowheres with the stubborn cuss. What he needs is to have some sense kicked into him!"

Reserving his opinion as to that, Jim took Stack aside. He lowered his voice to a murmur audible only to the outlaw.

"Things didn't break your way, Bill; but maybe it's not as bad as you think," he began. "Give us your help in this matter and I promise to do what I can for you afterward."

Stack shrugged. "What kin yuh do?" he countered bleakly. "Lanning's got me, an' he means to give me the works——"

"Maybe I can fix it so he won't."

"What yuh mean?" Bill spoke quickly, hope roughening his tone. "That you'll help me to give 'im the slip?"

Jim knew it was a case of whole hog or nothing. He took a deep breath. "Yes, Stack; I'll do even that—provided we grab the rest of the bunch, and Strange," he added.

Stack pretended to roll it dubidusly, but he had really made up his mind in a flash. Finally he faced Jim and thrust out his hand. Gripping it, Carver knew that a bargain had been sealed, and that if it came to that, he had pledged himself to step outside the law deliberately for this man. But thinking of Audrey, he did not regret what he had done.

Turning back to the others, he was brisk. "Get to the horses," he told Lanning. "Stack will take us to where Harkness is being held!"

CHAPTER XXII

STACK'S gun had been taken from him, but on Carver's advice, Lanning left him unbound. The lawman peered at Bill sharply, suspicious of a trick.

"Yuh mean it, Stack?" he barked. "You'll take us to this hide-out, an' no funny work?"

The outlaw gave him a grudging nod.

"Okay." Lanning's tone was grim. "We'll get goin'!"

Stack turned his horse and started away. Lanning and Carver pushed up beside him. In thin-lipped silence the posse started into the hills.

Stack set off as if he knew where he was going. Before long, Jim divined that he was making straight for the towering bulk of Slide Mountain, silhouetted blackly against the stars.

Soon the going got hard, for Bill did not swing aside for the ridges; he went straight up them. Nothing could have been better calculated to allay Lanning's doubts, yet he stuck to Stack like a burr. Something in the set of his angular shoulders said that he would shoot the outlaw down in a second at the first evidence of betrayal.

Stack gave no sign that he knew death rode at his shoulder. He seemed a different man. Even his surliness dropped from him, and he appeared actuated by a driving intent. Carver knew what it was. Not even his fear of the law was as great as his consuming hatred of Jared Strange; and it was at Strange that his venom was directed now.

Carver's restless mind prospected ahead. There was every chance that they might overtake the gang in time. They would not expect this promptness of action on the sheriff's part; and the belief that hours lay ahead of them in which to leave this country would tend to slow them up. They might even plan to take John Harkness with them.

He thought of Audrey, remaining behind at his spread. She must be wondering what was happening. He knew the strain she was under. He would have done anything to bring it to a swift end; but events must take their course. Thought of her brought her face before his mind's eye. There could be no question that she affected him powerfully. He knew he loved her; perhaps he had loved her from the moment he had laid eyes on her. It seemed strange to realize that not once had he seen her in her true quality. Once this unnatural ordeal of fear was swept away, he told himself that her innate sweetness would shine through. Again the hope agitated him that she might even look kindly on his attentions.

He thrust the thought from him hurriendly. He needed all his wits to-night. There could be no dreaming. He resolutely downed the feeling that such dreams as he allowed himself might be crushed and destroyed when put to the test.

Slide Mountain drew steadily nearer as the posse fought its way up the slopes. It loomed imposing and vast now, cutting off half the sky. Abruptly, just as Carver was beginning to wonder where the man could be going, Stack led the way down into a gloomy, rock-filled canyon and turned up it.

Lanning growled: "How far is this place we're goin' to, Stack?"

"Three or four miles," was the short answer.

"Will they be havin' guards out?" the sheriff persisted.

Stack's pause meant that he couldn't say. It was Carver who filled the gap.

"I don't think so," he asserted. "Those gents know it's a case of pick up and get. I'm counting on their expecting more time than they've really got. But they won't bother with covering themselves, knowing what they intend. If they really have made for their hide-out, they'll go there and do what they have to do—then clear out."

Stack's nod was one of agreement. Lanning caught it. He appeared satisfied.

Nevertheless, a close watch was kept to the fore as they pushed forward. The canyon wound on and on, rising steadily. It was a bleak and barren place, as though given over in season to terrific floods after the storms. Not a tuft of grass found lodgment in the crevices of the rocks; nor were there trees, except for gnarled and stunted pines clinging to the high ledges.

At one point Carver recognized his rocky surroundings. He and Candy, making their way across the hills, had found a way down into this canyon and, crossing it, had climbed back out again. He glanced at the lanky one, who nodded. The same thought was in the minds of both. Unawares they had stumbled on to the straight road to the owlhoot nest, only to pass it by.

Stack began to slacken pace as the canyon's floor narrowed to fifty yards, then twenty-five, and it began to wind back and forth as if nearing its head. The granite walls were less lofty now. Carver studied its black notch against the velvet of the night sky. Presently it seemed to him that the heights melted away. In their stead he saw he spiked frieze of spruce, standing out boldly against the cold stars.

"We're clost now," Stack muttered. "There's a valley——"

"Better quit our hosses, an' creep up?" Lanning inquired in a low tone.

"If yuh don't think I'm leadin' yuh into some kind of an ambush," the outlaw gave back, with thin contempt.

Lanning called a halt. The posse gathered there, tense with expectancy. Guns scraped softly against leather. The sheriff said: "Hanson, I reckon you'll have to stay with the broncs——"

They swung to the ground. The man gathered the reins in his hands. Bill Stack said hoarsely: "Fer Gawd's sake, Lannin'—are yuh leadin' me into this naked? I'm doin' somethin' fer yuh that yuh ain't got no right to ask or expect. . . . Give me a gun!" he entreated. "If I run into Strange, or Curly, or one of the others, my skin won't be worth a plugged nickel!"

Lanning hesitated, obviously reluctant to comply with his request. He turned to Carver.

"Yuh reckon this hombre is playin' square, Jim?" he demanded.

"I'm sure of it," Carver affirmed. "Give him a break, Lanning. You'll find you haven't made a mistake." He sounded confident, sure he knew what was in Stack's mind.

"Okay—but jest remember that I ain't takin' my eyes off yuh fer a second, Stack," the sheriff warned, handing over Bill's gun. Stack accepted it with a grunt. He turned.

"Foller me——"

They wound on through the soft dusk like so many shadowy Nez Perces. Stack clung to the canyon wall. Here tumbled boulders and up-tilted fragments of rock from above gave them cover of a sort. Carver found that his pulse was drumming quickly. A current flowed through him which steadily increased in strength and volume. Not till this moment had he realized how full-bodied was his desire to get at Jared Strange and these other men. He would have moved mountains then to accomplish it.

Suddenly it seemed that the canyon was filled with a soft glow of radiance. Alarm leaped alive in him until, glancing up, he realized that the moon, rising later to-night, had thrust above the barrier of the Tetons at last. It was sending its slanting rays across the canyon walls, faintly silvering the serried spruce tips furring the heights beyond.

A moment later he stopped with a grunt. A twist in the canyon gave him a glimpse ahead. He saw that the canyon, after pinching in so relentlessly, suddenly widened into a round, cup-like valley. Its walls were not high; yet they appeared unscalable. Crags overhung their sheer face; and above them the spruce rose like a cunning screen to conceal this place from prying eyes. There was a grove of trees in the valley also, pines by the look. The ground out there was uneven, humped with rocky dykes and weathered spires. On a little rise

near the west wall, backed up against the ghostly, shadowed grove, Carver saw two cabins.

Something leaped alive in him with a savage bound when he saw the glow of light from the cabins, and made out faint clumps nearby which could only be horses. They were in time!

Lanning's confidence in Stack appeared to be considerably strengthened; and at the same time there was a distrust born of the knowledge that the outlaw had deliberately, willingly betrayed his kind. If he could not hide this entirely behind his brusqueness of manner, Heck made no effort to dissemble it with talk.

"What kind of a set-up is this, anyway?" he muttered guardedly.

Stack returned: "That's all there is to it: the two cabins, an' this valley. There's another way out on the east side. A canyon breaks down from the mountain——"

As Carver had predicted, they had seen nothing of a guard as yet. Lanning said: "I need somebody to cover that canyon."

"Gimme two men," Hunch Wheeler spoke up, "an' there won't nary owlhoot git past me——"

Lanning told off two of his possemen. They stole away. There was need for swift action now, for getting in position before the rising moon threw a revealing glow down into the valley.

The sheriff turned to Candy. "Kin yuh hold this here trail, Sims, with another man or so?" he queried gruffly.

Candy grunted an affirmative, little pleased; for it did not wholly suit him to be left on the fringes of whatever was about to occur.

"Which cabin is Harkness being held in?" Carver asked Stack. The other did not respond at once.

"He was in the little one," he said at length. "Strange may have had him put in the other——"

"We've got to try to save Harkness, whatever we do, Lanning," Carver told the sheriff. Heck nodded.

"We'll do our best."

"We'll do better than that," Jim insisted sharply. "There can't be any slip-up here!"

Lanning was grappling with the problem in his stolid way. He dimly realized that were they to rush the cabins, Harkness's life would probably be forfeited, the more surely

as the outlaws saw their hope of escape vanishing. Testiness crept into his manner.

"Mebby yuh know how to manage this business, Carver!" he muttered.

Jim did not wait for a second invitation. "We've got to make certain of Harkness's whereabouts," he took hold crisply. "The rest of you follow me till we're within a couple hundred feet of the cabins. Then lie doggo while I sneak up for a look."

Lanning appeared about to demur, but in the end he gave grudging assent. Carver led off. He took full advantage of the inequalities of the ground, darting from rock to rock, and occasionally even crawling. He studied the cabins narrowly for every hint they could give.

That Strange's gang was all here was evident. Shadows passed and re-passed the rude sashless windows; he could hear the droning murmur of voices, and an occasional harsh laugh. Now and then a man stepped from one cabin and headed for the other. They were preparing to pull out; of that Carver assured himself. There was no idle movement. Packs were being prepared; a pile of them was stacked up before the larger cabin.

At a distance of fifty yards, Carver signed to Lanning and the others in token that they had come far enough. While they halted, he forged on, picking his route with extreme care. The pines beyond the cabins would have afforded admirable cover; but, not knowing who might be lurking there, he did not propose to risk the slightest possibility of discovery before the trap was set and ready to spring.

He made for the side of the nearest cabin. There was no opening in the log wall, unless an occasional light-leaking chink could be called that. Steadily he wormed nearer, working from one stump to another. He reached the wall without detection. For the space of a minute he remained crouched there, gathering his forces. Then creeping to the first chink of suitable size, he cautiously applied his eye to the opening.

It was no surprise to see Jared Strange, standing before the dead fireplace, talking to several others. They were arguing; and as he listened, Carver made out that the men scouted any serious likelihood of the valley's being discovered. They were for remaining for a time at least. Strange was obdurate.

"You don't know Bill Stack," he declared dourly, "if you think he'll let us get away with this! He'll take any

means he can lay hands on to square with us! It won't be more than a matter of hours before he shows up here with a posse—if he can get Lanning to listen to him at all."

The others scoffed; but Carver had reason again to admit to himself once more the Easterner's shrewdness.

"You can all say what you like," Strange cut them off curtly. "We're clearing out and that's final. If Harkness were to be picked up now, what he can tell would land us in the pen for life——"

"Fer kidnappin'?" Curly retorted.

"You forget that we've kept him close by here," Strange tossed back. "You wouldn't listen to me, and let him hear all your talk. There's nothing he doesn't know about. What Stack would be careful to keep to himself to save his own hide, Harkness would spill in a minute!"

"Wal, that's why I claim yo're dead wrong," Curly told him. "Stack stands to lose as much as any of us. It was him that put Lang an' Johnson out of the picture! He'll think a long while before he leads the sheriff to somethin' that's goin' to spill that."

A flash of fire went over Carver at the words. Then it had been Stack who had blasted Skip and Tex; or at least, it had been done at his orders! For a moment Jim had all he could do to keep himself in hand. His hatred blazed up; he wanted to go back at once, and call the outlaw to account. There was chagrin in the fact that he had made Stack a promise—the one promise he could not permit himself to fulfil in this world, if he didn't want the memory of his murdered friends for ever on his conscience.

"You make the mistake of crediting Stack with brains," Strange was answering Curly, with scornful inflection. "I tell you, he'll do anything! . . . As for Harkness," he added, "it would have been better to put him out of the way as soon as we were done plucking him. Then whatever was told would be no more than so much talk!"

Curly shook his head decidedly.

"No point in rubbin' the man out," he averred. "It'll only make matters worse, Strange." He appeared thoughtful, and went on soberly: "It'd be better to leave him here when we pull out. He'll be found, accordin' to you; an' once we've shook the dust, anything he kin say'll be nothin' more'n talk."

Carver, crouched outside the log wall, waited tensely for

the answer. Curly's proposal was the sense of the situation. Were Strange to agree, Jim would have been tempted to try persuading Heck Lanning to draw off at least until Harkness was safe.

The next moment, his leaping hopes for Audrey were dashed. He heard Strange saying: "Nothing doing, Brennan! I'm not leaving any sign-boards along my back trail! Either Harkness rides with us, or he remains here—dead."

A chill went over Jim at the callousness of the man. Strange meant what he said. But Curly was speaking:

"Wal, we don't want no drag on us, unless there's somethin' in it. Yuh been sayin' all along that we could squeeze Harkness fer more cash. I'm fer tryin'. How'll we go about it?"

Strange cogitated briefly. "Hard to tell," he admitted frankly. "I might have another talk with the man." He turned to one of the outlaws. "Idaho, you and Stretch go over and get Harkness. Bring him in here."

The man called Idaho, and a tall, lanky outlaw turned towards the door. They were gone for several minutes, while silence held here, in which there was something brooding and sinister. The peace of an outlaw camp was never an easy peace. Carver had barely time for that fleeting reflection when he heard the crunch of boots. This time, three men stepped back in the door. And the man in the middle was John Harkness.

CHAPTER XXIII

His eyes glued to the chink in the wall, Carver gazed with interest at Audrey's father. Upwards of fifty, with iron-grey hair, he was a fine figure of a man. His aquiline face expressed courage and dignity. There was undisguised contempt in the look he turned on Jared Strange.

His hands were bound behind his back. He stood there solidly, and there was something fine in the way he confronted his betrayer with no inkling that help was at hand.

Strange glanced at him indifferently. "Harkness," he began in his cold, emotionless voice, "we're pulling out."

Harkness's face showed his surprise. He waited for what this move was to mean for himself.

"We don't want to be bothered with you," Strange went on casually. "For one thing, you're dangerous. You know too much."

Harkness burst out hoarsely: "For Lord's sake, Strange! You double-crossed me and took every cent I had in the world; but haven't you any compassion? Turn me loose. Leave me behind, and I'll swear to keep my mouth shut——"

"You won't have to swear to anything—if we do leave you," Strange retorted significantly. Harkness knew what he was up against. Sweat started out on his forehead.

"Give me a chance!" he burst out. "Let me have a horse. I'll keep up with you!"

He knew he was pleading for his life; and Carver knew it too. He had read to the end the malign spirit of ruthlessness animating Jared Strange. The man was utterly without human feeling. He thought only of himself. He said now:

"Why should we? You've refused steadily to communicate with your friends, demanding money."

"I'll do it," Harkness promised. "I'll do anything, only don't—don't——" He could not go on.

Strange appeared to come to a decision. He turned to Curly. "Get up the horses," he grunted.

Carver knew then what the answer was. Nothing seemed to mean as much to Strange as money. He was wild to lay hands on more and more of it; perhaps with some idea of putting the whole business behind him and escaping to some foreign country. Harkness would be carried with the outlaws for the present.

There was no more time to be lost. Turning and dropping, as Curly started out of the cabin, Jim stole back towards his friends. Their best chance, he knew, lay in nabbing the gang here, before they started away. The entrances to the hidden valley were guarded; but once they were mounted, it would be twice as difficult to bring the renegades to submission.

Hastily he made his way from stump to stump. Rounding a rock, he came face to face with Lanning.

"You saw?" he exclaimed quickly. "Strange is there. He's got Harkness in that first cabin. They're getting ready to leave——"

Lanning whirled to his men.

"Okay, boys. Spread out an' close in! When yuh get close enough, grab the first owlhoot yuh lay hands on! We'll round up this crowd in jig-time!"

They separated and began to worm forward. They had to exercise extreme caution, for now that they were preparing to pull out, the outlaws were busy. Carver counted six of them moving about the cabins. Curly Brennan came in with the horses, hazing them ahead of him. Hackamores were grabbed, saddles tossed on. Others were throwing the packs on ponies and lashing them down.

There was an electrical tension in the air as Jim worked closer. He was striving to reach a position as nearly opposite to the front of the cabin as possible, realizing that whatever violence might attend the showdown, it would in all probability occur there.

Suddenly, without warning of its coming, a gunshot rang out. One of the outlaws had spotted a moving shadow near the cabin, and had thrown his gun without waiting to investigate. The drumming answer came as quickly, as several possemen fired at once.

Miraculously, no one was hit; but the outbreak of hostilities threw a shock into the gang. Hoarse cries sounded; men ran here and there, snatching up rifles. Carver heard Lanning's stentorian yell from over on his left:.

"Throw down them guns, the pack of yuh! We got yuh cornered! The first one that makes a phony move is a dead man!"

The order had no appreciable effect, unless it was to bring Jared Strange rushing to the door of the cabin. The moon was not yet high enough to throw its full radiance into the valley, but the light from the candles inside threw the Easterner's figure into silhouette.

He had scarcely appeared before a man sprang into view behind him. It was Harkness. He barged into Strange, knocking him aside; then came running out into the open.

"Here I am, men!" he called. "Don't shoot—it's me! John Harkness!"

The surprised outlaws were beginning to gather their wits. They whirled at Harkness's cry, bellows of rage issuing from their leather lungs. Scarcely one of their number but knew what it would mean were their prisoner to escape in this manner. Guns came swinging around to bear full on him.

Carver read his danger before any one else. He started to his feet and headed for Harkness on a dead run.

"Drop!" he cried loudly. "Lie down, Harkness, before you're riddled!"

Harkness whirled towards him. He had no inkling of who Jim might be, but was quick enough to recognize the voice of a friend. Instead of complying with Carver's instructions, he started forward.

He had not taken three steps before a fusillade rang out. Apparently struck by half a dozen slugs, Harkness suddenly halted. For a bare instant he stood there, swaying. Then he fell like a tree uprooted by storm. He was dead when he struck the ground; somehow Jim was certain of it.

The knowledge filled him with a rage beside which anything he had experienced before was as nothing. He had witnessed the wanton, cold-blooded murder of a man whose life had been infinitely precious to him for Audrey's sake; it imbued him with a bitterness that ate like acid.

"Strange!" he called wickedly.

Strange whirled towards the voice. Carver was so angry that he meant to give the other no shadow of a show. But even as he fired, Strange flung himself aside.

Bill Stack saw what had happened. His bellow rose on the darkness.

"Damn yuh, Strange—stand up an' take yore medicine like a man, you mangy wolf!"

He was firing as he ran forward. Several times the red tongues of fire licked the shadows from the muzzle of his gun. He seemed filled with a ferocity superior even to Carver's. From the moment Heck Lanning had captured him, Stack had been living for this moment, only fearful lest it slip through his fingers.

But Strange was not hit. A single stride carried him into the shadows along the cabin wall, and there he danced with bewildering rapidity. He was still on his feet when Curly caught his arm and hurled him aside.

"Git a-goin'!" Curly yelled. "Grab a bronc, an' make dust!"

Strange needed no second warning. Grabbing the reins of a pony, he threw himself astride. Several guns bore on him as he jammed in the spurs. Carver tried to drop the horse. It plunged at his shot, then sprang forward.

It was Curly who proved the real general in this pinch. With the other outlaws, he set up a raking fire that held the possemen at bay for a vital moment. Somehow they managed to possess themselves of mounts and to swing aboard.

Lanning was beside himself at the failure to nab every man jack of them on the spot. "Git our hosses up here!" he roared. Men ran for them.

As a matter of fact, they were near at hand; for the man detailed to hold them had started this way the minute he heard the guns begin to talk. Quickly the posse mounted. Before the outlaws had fairly faded in the shadows, following the wall of the valley, they were in hot pursuit.

Carver found himself riding beside Bill Stack. The latter was beside himself with disappointment. But he had no intention of confessing defeat.

"There's a trail leadin' up the wall over there at the notch!" he ejaculated. "I never took a hoss over it, but mebby it kin be done! That's where they're headin' anyway!"

Jim flung him a look. He scarcely dared trust himself to speak. Knowing as he did that Stack was the murderer of Skip and Tex, he felt the strong itch to lay hands on him here and now, twist the life out of his throat. One thing held him back, and one only—the knowledge that Strange and these outlaws who had killed Audrey Harkness's father were still at large. It would require every available hand to capture them.

Jim made up his mind what was to be done in Stack's case. He would do even as he said: give the treacherous outlaw his chance. Then he would go after him himself. There was no other way.

The moon was creeping down the valley's wall towards its floor now. The trees far above were like ghostly sentinels. The craggy rocks rose silent and massive. On this side, a fringe of pines followed the wall, and it was into this cover that the fleeing outlaws were racing. They fired over their shoulders, the slugs whining about the possemen without slowing them. The next moment the curtain of pines closed behind them.

Jim had no fears of an ambush as he burst into the edge of the trees; nor did Lanning. There could be no mistaking the temper of the quarry. To a man they were intent on putting distance behind them as rapidly as possible.

Boulders appeared in the pursuers' path as the ground rose in a sharp pitch. Gazing through the trees, Carver made out the notch which Stack had mentioned. It looked wild and ragged; shadows swathed its base, but he sensed the wild tangle of riven granite and hanging crags there.

The trail twined upward to steeply that within a few minutes they were forced to dismount and climb on foot. They were once more enclosed now, the ghostly gloom enfolding them. Carver was in the lead, with Lanning at his heels, when gunfire abruptly probed at them from above. A bullet screamed off a rock beside Jim. He had his gun up in a hurry. His answering shot made the echoes bellow.

"Keep a-goin'!" the sheriff threw at him fiercely. "We can't let 'em slip away now!"

Jim had no intention of stopping, but he used caution in working upward from rock to rock. There was need for care; for the fire from above increased in volume.

"They're pinned up there or somethin'——" Bill Stack muttered. "Can't get the hosses through, or it's takin' 'em time, or else they got off the trail."

There was no question that the outlaws were making some sort of a stand. Their fire was persistent, vicious. Suddenly, Bill Stack's horse creamed and reared. It had been hit.

"Look out below!" Lanning bawled, as the horse crashed backward and started to roll, legs wildly thrashing. There was a mad scramble to get out of the way. One man had his footing knocked from under him, but no further damage was done.

It decided Carver. Leading his mount aside on a roomy ledge, which was somewhat protected, he threw the reins over its head and left it there.

"What yuh doin'?" Stack demanded, watching.

"I'm going up there after them gents!" Carver rasped.

Lanning said gustily: "We're with yuh, Carver!"

They started upward. The outlaws spotted them, for the flashes from their guns increased. Jim received a furrow across his scalp, and felt the warm blood running down his neck. He paid no attention.

"I'm warnin' yuh, Strange—yo're washed up!" Lanning called into the shadows.

Strange laughed mirthlessly, somewhere up there. "Come and get me, Lanning," he taunted coolly.

Carver and Stack were working their way upward with

dogged persistence. Had it not been for the flying lead, it would have been an easy matter. As it was, they were forced to keep cover of some sort between them and the enemy.

Jim had hearkened carefully to Strange's response. He believed he knew where the man was. Stack felt the same way. That they were correct was evidenced a moment later, when the Easterner's voice broke out in harsh invective.

"Damn you, stay down there!" he cried. "I'll blow you both to hell!"

Stack blistered him with as good as he sent. "I'm goin' to square with you, Strange!" he promised in a chilling tone.

Strange concentrated his fire on their position. Promptly working apart, they infuriated him with their pertinacity. Carver had definitely located him now. He was holed up on a narrow ledge, with boulders piled about and crags overhanging the spot. With a cry of rage, Strange suddenly stood up and emptied his gun at Stack.

Stack weathered the storm and grimly held on. It seemed to get to Strange then that he was up against something besides the stubborn resolution of an ordinary man. Thumbing cartridges into his gun, he started to work away, swinging through the crags with an agility Carver had not suspected him of possessing. Fragments of rock flew about him as Jim's bullets clipped the crags, more than once coming within an ace of centring the target fairly.

Stack was closest to the quarry now. He had not fired for some moments. Carver suspected what was in his brain. He wanted to reach Strange, lay violent hold of him, break him with his hamlike hands.

"Careful, Stack!" he warned sharply. "He's leading you to a trap!"

Bill might not have heard him. He climbed on, like some inexorable, massive gorilla. Frozen, Jim could only watch in fascination.

His guess had been a shrewd one. The ledge Strange followed, so narrow that it would not have afforded a foothold in spots but for the crags, ran on for half a dozen yards, only to end in space. But near its termination there was a recess in the rocks. Reaching it, Strange slipped in with a lithe movement just as Carver's bullet ricochetted from the rock at a point where his body had been only an instant before.

Still Stack drove on. It was a duel between him and his bitter foe now—a duel of cold nerve, rather than of brains or brawn. Steadily he advanced till he reached the ledge. He started along it.

"Stack, come back!" Jim cried desperately.

Bill didn't even turn his head. A moment later he neared the recess in which Strange lay in wait. Jim held his gun at the ready, hoping against hope that he might gain a glimpse of the man at the last moment. One clear glimpse was all he would need.

He was not to get it. Approaching the point where the ledge took a twist, just short of the indentation, Stack vented an exultant cry and plunged forward. Carver caught no more than the fleetest impression of Jared Strange's reaching hands. The two men came together with a solid impact. Hanging on with bated breath, and straining his eyes uselessly, Jim heard the scrape of their boots, the harsh rasping pant of their breath. But they were beyond his sight.

Suddenly there was a thud. Before Carver had any inkling of what it portended, he saw Stack reappear. The outlaw reeled on the edge of the chasm. And in that moment, Strange's arm flashed out. His fist smacked against Stack's jaw.

With a hoarse cry, Bill Stack lost his balance and plunged downward into space.

CHAPTER XXIV

CARVER clung to the rocks for a moment after Bill Stack had plunged to his death, getting a grip on himself. If the sight had left him sick, he did not omit to watch for the slightest glimpse of Strange. He did not need to remind himself the man was capable of anything. But the Easterner did not reappear. Jim heard his boots scrapping on the rocks and knew what it meant. Strange had found some means of scrambling out of his niche.

Carver flung a glance over his shoulder. A lively gun battle was in progress. He saw Heck Lanning making his way laboriously upward. Lanning waved to him.

"Get Strange!" he called harshly. "We've got these birds cornered! It's jest a matter of smokin' 'em out!"

Jim had no intention of letting Strange get away. That the other would strive desperately towards that end was clear. He was already separated from his cohorts; it would be only a matter of losing himself in the rocks.

The muscles tightened along Carver's jaw. Without giving the lawman an answer, he started to pull himself higher. It was hard going. But finally he reached the narrow ledge along which Stack had crawled to his death. He worked along to the recess in which Strange had taken refuge. It took courage to thrust his head around the corner. But Strange was not waiting for him. He was gone. Jim glanced upward.

It seemed incredible that the renegade had wormed his way up that narrow crevice. He had been forced to use knees and elbows, hanging on practically by his finger-nails. But that he had gone that way there could be no question. In a lull in the firing, Jim caught a trickle and rattle of loose stones from above.

Strange was still near at hand. The knowledge filled Jim with a fierce exultance. Without a second thought, he essayed to follow.

Had Strange delayed then, the game might have been in his hands. Clinging to the walls like a human fly, Carver would have been utterly helpless had his enemy shown himself. But Strange had kept going; and three minutes later Jim had negotiated the precarious chimney and stood once more on solid footing. There was a wild jumble of split and riven rock up here. The frosts and winter cold of centuries had cracked great blocks away from the wall. Slowly crumbling, ready to give way and thunder downward into valley, they clung here as if waiting. Strange was creeping away amongst them.

Again Jim stopped to listen. He could hear nothing. No slightest scrape of boots to indicate the direction the quarry had taken. The search took on the character of a duel in the dark, but Jim had no thought of hesitating. If there was one thing in the world of which he was absolutely certain, it was that he would not stop now until he had brought Jared Strange to book.

He started on over the rocks. It was necessary to crawl through gaps, creep up slanting inclines where the slightest mishap would spell death. His rifle hampered him greatly, but he did not succumb to the temptation to abandon it and trust to his Colt.

Overhead, the communing spruce marched down to the rocks. A murmurous breeze played through their branches. At that moment Jim was utterly impervious to their magic spell. He knew only that they defeated the moon's efforts to light up the rocks, their shadows lying here thick as ink. Strange could ask nothing better than to escape in their friendly cover.

With better going, Carver ran half a dozen yards. and abruptly halted. He had left the fight in the notch far enough behind so that the drum of the guns no longer drowned out every sound. He heard the low mournful moan of the wind now, and far away an owl's ghostly lament echoed. But it was not these sounds that had arrested him. There was something nearer at hand. He had heard a muffled exclamation, and what appeared to have been the quick brush of clothing against rough granite. Was Strange lying in wait for him, ready to blast him down? The thought seared through his mind in a flash. The next instant, he was pushing warily on, his straining eyes probing every shadow.

Nevertheless, it was a total surprise to turn the corner of a rock and find himself face to face with a man half-kneeling beside the boulder. He never knew what kept him from firing pointblank. But even as he arrested the impulse to squeeze the trigger, he saw that the other was not Strange. It was Curly Brennan.

Carver lowered his gun slowly, gazing at the other speculatively.

"So you managed to slip away, Curly?"

Brennan's grunt was in the affirmative. He spoke with an effort, and it was apparent that he was fighting something back: "Not without a slug in me, though——"

He had abandoned his gun. At least there was none in his hand, and Carver saw that his holster was empty.

Jim said quickly: "Where are you hit?"

Curly took his hand away from his chest, and Carver saw the bloody splotch on his shirt, ominously low. He shook his head.

"I'm afraid it's your finish, Brennan. Better wait right here till I can get back and get you to a doctor——"

"Like hell it's my finish!" Curly retorted with unexpected strength. "An' as fer Heck Lannin', he'll never see me again, I kin promise yuh that!"

"What's to prevent my taking you back to him right now?"

Something hard and cold flickered in the outlaw's steely pupils as their glances crossed.

"Nothin', I reckon," he grunted stoically; "if yuh kin square it with yoreself, Carver——"

Jim knew what he was driving at. It had been due solely to this man's goodwill that he and Audrey Harkness had escaped from Stack's crowd that afternoon. It was a debt not lightly passed over. Jim changed the subject abruptly, asking:

"Did you see Strange?"

Curly burst into scornful cursing. "I seen 'im!" he responded, his visage twisting with anger. "He come by here not two minutes ago! But do yuh think he'd give me any help? I knowed better'n to ask fer it. All I did was ask if he had an extra gun—mine got knocked outa my hand, an' lost in the rocks—an' Strange told me to go to hell! . . . That's what we throwed Bill Stack down fer!" He was self-condemning now. "I should'a followed my hunch an' quit this outfit when Reb Battle got rubbed out!"

Carver rasped: "Which way was Strange heading?"

Curly gestured with his chin. But instead of pushing on at once, Carver delayed, looking down at the other. Brennan read something of his thoughts.

"Yuh got me fair an' square, Carver—jest when I thought I was goin' to make it," he managed flatly. "What are yuh doin' with me?"

"I'm afraid the only solution to this," Jim answered sobely, "is that I never ran across you at all. . . . You're heading out of this country for good, I take it?"

"Right!" Curly assured him gruffly.

Jim nodded. "You have one chance in a hundred of making it. Personally, I don't think you will. A man would be justified in leaving you for dead with that hole in you. But if you should make it," he concluded deliberately, "it'll be all right with me."

Curly appeared scarcely able to believe he had heard aright. Something came into his visage that was like the birth of hope. "Gawd, Carver; that's shore white of yuh——" he began his thanks. But Jim did not wait for them. Turning away, he dropped the wounded man from his mind, every

faculty at his command focussed on Jared Strange, who with every passing moment was increasing his lead.

Half a dozen strides carried him into the dusky spruce, its twisting aisles patterned with a deceptive light. This way the Easterner had gone, according to Curly. For a fleeting moment, Jim doubted that it could be so; for ahead lay not open ground, but the rising battlements of a monument-like granite sprie, a virtual watchtower overlooking the hidden valley. Surely Strange would shun that? But reflection quickly persuaded Carver otherwise.

The Easterner, he shrewdly surmised, had no intention of seeking to make his way out of the mountains on foot. He had selected the craggy butte as the best place to conceal himself for a few hours, or even a day, until the posse had done its work and departed. Perhaps afterward he counted on finding an abandoned horse somewhere about, which would enable him to flee at speed.

As usual, Strange was depending on his wits; and had he none other than Heck Lanning to deal with, Carver was forced to concede that in all probability his ruse would have succeeded. It was only by chance that he had himself stumbled on an explanation of the renegade's game.

He made for the rugged butte jutting through the trees, his gaze busy. It was a wild, almost inaccessible spot. Evidently a variety of game made it a haunt of quiet hours, for a number of faint trails ran up the shoulder. At the base of the spire, on this side, great jumbles of shattered rock lay piled. He clambered across them, reached a wide crevice running upward.

As he came out above the trees, where the light was stronger, a gunshot suddenly clapped from above. Strange had spotted him.

"Don't come any farther, Carver!" the man snarled. He shot again.

Jim clung to the cover of a jutting rock, debating his course. It was clear he could get no higher this way. After a second he started to work at a tangent across the rugged flank of the butte. Strange detected his intention. Again he fired. The slug whined away into space, after striking near at hand with an ugly spat. Carver held grimly on.

Silence fell—an ominous silence. Strange was changing position likewise. The wan moon splashed the rocks with pallied colour, but the shadows were deceptive. Jim found a chimney up which he inched cautiously. He worked slowly,

wary of allowing Strange to slip past him and escape below.

Ten minutes passed. Jim was near the top now. A goat could scarcely have negotiated this precarious footing without extreme care. Still the ragged spires jutted overhead, weired and ghostlike. Death lurked amongst them.

Carver dropped suddenly as another shot cracked spitefully near at hand. "Damn you, Carver! I'll blast you!" Strange roared. But Jim noted that he was sparing of his fire now. The answer came to him in a flash. The Easterner had only the bullets in the gun he carried; he had to conserve them or lose this grim game. As for Jim, he had no intention of firing except as a last resort. It was his purpose to capture Strange and turn him over to the law.

He wormed on, studying every move. Once or twice the sharp scrape of boots came to him as Strange made some sudden shift. The renegade's breath was whistling. He was fiercely determined not to be taken. He began to retreat slowly, working towards the valley side of the butte. It stood at the brink of the steep wall; a vast chasm opened on that side.

Sternly pressing his quarry, Jim came to a little open space, where only a few loose boulders lay scattered. Strange had taken refuge among them. Something like panic gripped the man now. He was watching for the slightest chance to drill his pursuer, ready to strike with the quickness of a rattlesnake.

"Throw that gun away, Strange!" Jim called flatly. "I'm coming at you!"

"I'll be waiting!" was the terse challenge.

Jim accepted it literally. Breaking from cover sharply, he plunged forward. He sprawled behind a rock ten feet away just as Strange fired. The bullet had ripped through his shirt, but he was untouched. Strange vented a wrathy bellow. He knew he had missed. And he had only one shot left.

"The game's up, Strange!" Carver taunted, hoping to rattle the other.

For once, there was no answer. Jim carefully calculated his chances. The thought shot through his brain that in another moment the Easterner would make a break for freedom. He did not intend to give him that chance. Getting to his feet, he gathered his forces. The next instant, he was in the open and charging the rock he believed concealed the other.

He was not mistaken. With a cougarish growl, Strange stepped into plain sight. His face was twisted with rage and hatred. His gun was levelled. Even as Jim made for him, he fired.

Jim never knew how he avoided death in that instant. But somehow he succeeded. Strange knew he was done. Desperation flashed in his face. His gun clattered. Before Carver could lay a hand on him, he suddenly whirled to the edge of the rocks. The chasm of the valley lay there, yawning. With a cry, Strange reached the brink and flung himself over. For a split second he remained in sight, arms and legs wildly flinging; both terror and fanatic determination in his visage. Then he disappeared.

In the soft warmth of an early-morning sun, Carver saddled up. He was in the J. C. yard, the Stepping Stone gurgling between its rocky banks a few yards away. Hunch and Candy had come out to watch.

"Figgerin' on a little ride?" Hunch queried with elaborate casualness. Carver nodded.

"Nice day fer a jaunt," Candy took up the sly ribbing. "Reckon mebby I'll go 'long with yuh——"

Jim grinned. They knew where he was going; but he chose to give them no satisfaction.

"Another time, Candy," he said dryly. "It happens I've got business to-day."

"That what they call it now?" Candy grunted, as Carver swung into the hull. The other assented.

"That's what it is," he concurred. "There'll be plenty of time for riding next week, I don't doubt."

There was a faint grimness in his tone, for he did not expect anything to come of to-day's efforts. Something drove him to make them, and once that had been accomplished, he would at least have done his best. But he was not particularly hopeful as he jogged away in the direction of Medicine Dance.

Arriving in town, he went at once to the hotel. Audrey was staying there; having moved in from the spread the day after the capture of Reb Battle's old owlhoot band, a week ago. It had been no easy task, breaking the news of her father's death to her, Carver recalled. That she had taken it stoically had only proven how deep the barb went into her heart. There had been a funeral; Harkness had been interred, at Carver's suggestion, on a grassy knoll in the J. C. ranch yard. The

worst of the whole tragic business had been put behind now; but Jim knew it would be a long time before the memory of it all faded.

Audrey was expecting him to-day. He found her in the hotel parlour, dressed for riding. She gave him her cool, courageous smile.

"Are we all ready, Jim?"

He nodded. They walked out to the street. There was an extra mount for Audrey; he helped her to mount. Swinging astride himself, he turned to her questioningly.

"Where would you like most to go, Audrey?"

There was nothing light in the question; for he divined that this might well be their last ride together. All details in connection with her father's abduction and robbery had been cleared away; a tidy sum of money, the twenty thousand dollars from the cache, had been recovered from Jared Strange's body, and had been turned over to her. There was nothing to hold her in this country any longer.

She said: "If you don't mind, I should like to ride out to the J. C.——"

He looked his surprise. That could hardly be either a pleasant or a novel ride for her, he reflected. And yet, it was not impossible to divine her purpose. Expecting to depart for the East shortly, she would naturally want one more look at her father's grave. His hopes sank.

"Anywhere you wish," he assented gravely.

It was early afternoon when they reached the spread. It had been a pleasant ride after all, for there had been many things to talk about. With the breaking of tension, he found in her all the charm and appeal he had divined, and more. In vain he strove to put from him the thought that he might never see her again.

They skirted the edge of the range, following the course of the Stepping Stone. It was a beautiful day. A soft edge of breeze tempered the heat, and a mystical haze lay along the horizon. Yet the lofty Tetons stood up in the thin air as if magnified.

Audrey sighed, gazing about her. "I was right, Jim," she said. "I do love this country of yours——"

"It's a fine place to live," he agreed simply.

"You once told me," she pursued, "that with money, you could make a real ranch of the J. C. Do you still feel the same way?"

Oddly enough, with the expectation of losing her soon, he was only mildly interested in what, up until a few weeks ago, had always been his fondest dream.

"I might," he answered. "The money I made with the wild horses will give me a start, anyway——"

"But if you took a partner?"

He was startled. But she couldn't mean what, for a shaken instant, he had dared believe she might. He said, managing to steady his voice:

"I doubt if I could find the right one, Audrey."

"Would I do, Jim?" she asked demurely, her tone tender. Staring at her, his jaw dropped. "You could buy in the Midnight range, and throw it and the J. C. together. We could——" She broke off. "Why, what is the matter?"

He shoved his bronc close to hers. There was something grim in his roughness as he took hold of her arms.

"Do you mean that, Audrey?" he got out hoarsely. "Because I can't stand having you twit me——"

"Twit you! . . . My dear!" She flushed rosy, her long lashes veiling her eyes. "I was never more serious in my life."

Still he found it impossible to believe.

"You mean you—that you—care for me?"

"Jim, I believe I have—cared for you from the very first," she murmured softly. "And you——?"

The masterful manner in which he drew her into his arms was answer enough. Their lips met in a long kiss. When it was over, drawing a tremulous breath of triumph and new vitality, Carver told himself that no dream he had ever had would be too fantastic to come true now, with the key to them all fitted cosily into the curve of his arms.

THE END